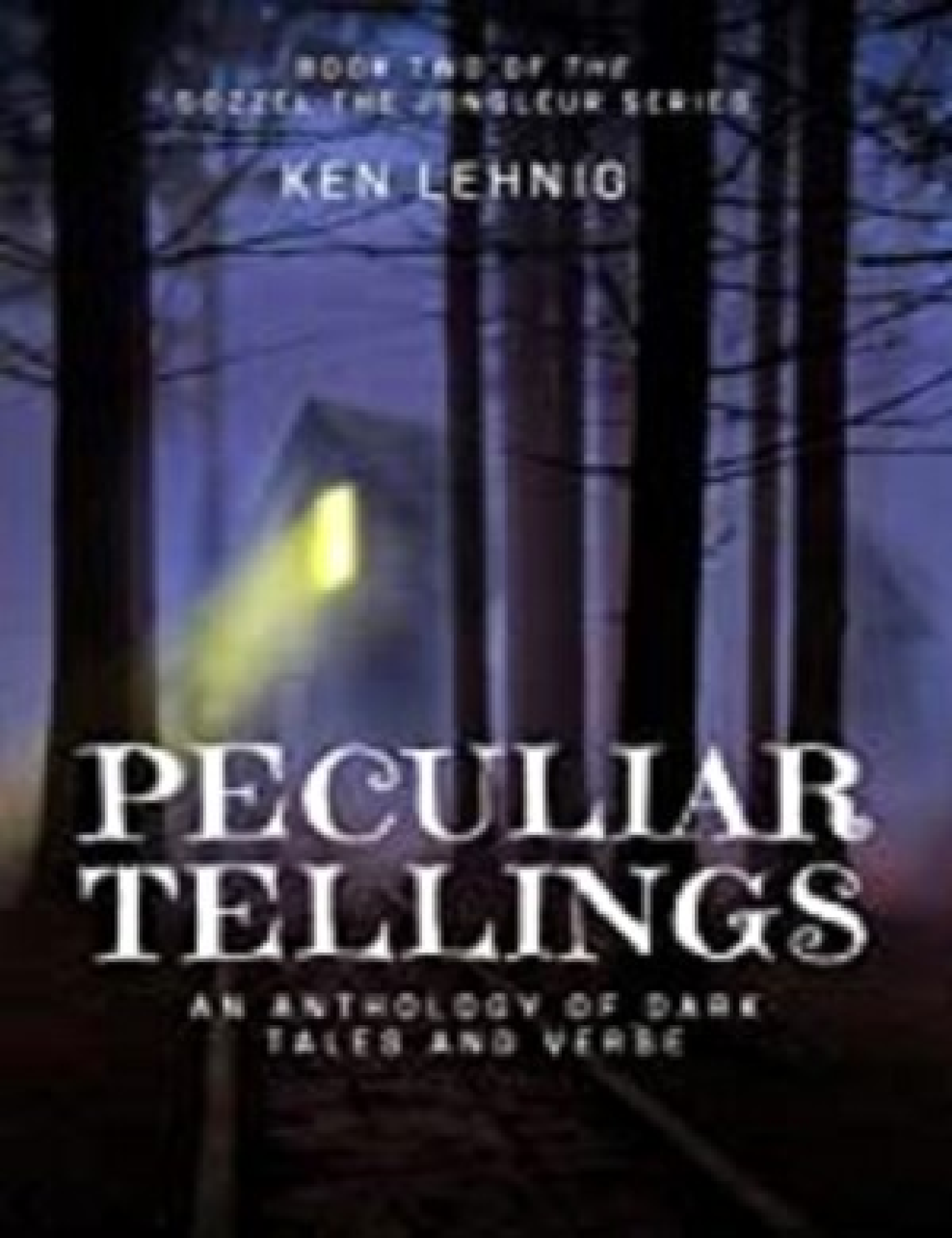

BOOK TWO OF THE
KOZIKA THE JUGGLER SERIES
KEN LEHNIG
PECULIAR
TELLINGS
AN ANTHOLOGY OF DARK
TALES AND VERSE

PECULIAR TELLINGS
SOZZEL THE JONGLEUR II

An Anthology of Dark Tales and Verse

By

Ken Lehnig

SMASHWORDS EDITION

* * * * *

PUBLISHED BY:

Deep Dry Dark Publishing

Cover and Illustrations by Ken Lehnig

Peculiar Telling's

Sozzel the Jongleur II

Copyright © 2011 & 2020 by Ken Lehnig

Smashwords Edition License Notes

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

***

Table of Contents

A Letter to Dr. Daniels: Things are not as they seem.

George's Monster: An Agent with a date with destiny.

In Mrs. Archer's Service: The extraordinary can happen.

The Way Things Are: How much is fate and how much is just the way it is?

Who's to Say: Some folks just have a rock and roll knack about time.

Fade Away: Here in seven days – gone in seven days.

Coulter Ridge: Resistance is not futile.

A Monster: A poem

Buildings: A poem

Circumstance: A poem

Four Horses: A poem

My Mind Is A Carnival: A poem

The Mystic: A poem

Sozzel the Jongleur

The night is chilly and the full moon shines down, casting sharp shadows where invisible things crouch, and watch, the comings and goings of the living. The jongleur pulls up his collar and walks into the warmth and golden light of the pub. He unstraps his sack and pulls out an old guitar. The dour patrons are quiet, and perhaps a little fearful of a stranger in their midst. A bright and happy song is offered but does little to change the somber mood. So, he puts down his guitar and begins to spin tales, and poetry, to entertain, and perhaps even to send a shiver up a spine or two.

He stands upon the bar and recites:

I picked proper strings
and let the rim shot fire
against the cracked plaster's
calloused ear
so many loud drunken tales and stories told
some haunt,
lingering still,
in smoky shadows

Bereft of kindness
this shelter offers little
but a tune and spirit
down some sad memory
whatever webs I deem to spin and ply
really only lies about other uneasy worlds
so sozzel the jongleur

The old sot smiles
and his filthy cohort dance
a jiggle of old bones
and graceless promenades
roughhewed, true to the gravel tones I entrain
no eminence grise
no gift
could I yet endue

But through parlance
it behooves me to find comfort
where my tongue's lilt
has gained some merit

My kin,
the rag tag and bobtail
fuddle and frolic
let go this day's nettle and lift your saddened heart
and sozzel the jongleur

So, for the mood
I'll change the cadence and intone
a brighter and witty air
'bout fools and finer folk

whose willful and wily ways did bring them ruin
what trickled down
alas and all
only the familiar penury

This night no final call,
too real this song to let it rest
we'll share a strain
I'll acquaint the dire or humorous tale
of foolishness and happenstance in a lunatic world
belly up,
gratuit the sommelier

fie to this misspent day
And sozzel the jongleur

There are moments in life where one may sadly discover that all the Diplomas, all that one has learned, for all possible eventualities that one skillfully prepares, is of no immediate use.

A LETTER TO DOCTOR DANIELS

Dear Dr. D.F. Daniels,

My name is Abraham Moses Jennings; a name you well know. It is three in the afternoon and because of what I know I will not survive the night.

That statement alone would have me diagnosed as a paranoid and would pleasurably boil your morbid curiosity. Trust me; the agents of my demise are real and determined. Maybe in the end a psychiatrist that is a self-serving and a compulsive liar, as myself, would be the perfect choice for what I am about to impart to you. Once you do the only thing a well-balanced, fully integrated, well-adjusted, sane person would do, which is to dismiss everything I claim. You most certainly will dismiss it and I will be dead.

I am a successful liar, though not entirely a fraud, with a thriving practice in New York City. That is to say that being a liar was the first building block in the construct of my life - after I succeeded in attaining my Ph.D. When I signed on my license I purposely neglected to write, or type, in my surname, Jennings. If the State Board missed it, as I hoped they would, I would be Dr. Abraham Moses. If, on the other hand, they caught it I would feign shock, embarrassment, and surprise, and make the correction.

They missed it and I spent twenty years as a successful 'Jewish' therapist to New York's richest neurotics. I discarded the Michigan bred, middle class, rural Lutheran, for the Agnostic, urban reformed, Jew. The result, as I had hoped, was that I became rich and respected. I have one living relative, who I have never met, and I had disconnected from my friends once I left college. My old self just disappeared. Sadly, my Lutheran guilt-based Christian Ethic dictated that I must pay for my transgressions; not only for my dupery, but to raise myself up as a good American, one seeking, prospering, and pursuing happiness, including my foolish and deliberate, not so American, explorative delving into matters best left to the divine. Those machinations are and should be hidden from all but the Angels who have the awesome task of implementing the working of each cog in that great and cosmic device.

That does not sound like an Agnostic, nor am I an Ecumenical. I am, however, a Realist and an Expectant for I believe now, in horror and fear, that there are indeed more things in the heavens and earth than my simple philosophy contain. Indeed, good Doctor, I write this to you as an 'eclaircissement.

I write this to you precisely because you have declared yourself my foeman, and I, in the truest form, accept your summons. For these ten years you have repudiated every word I have ever published, as pop-culture dribble, and I have never offered any rebuttal. I am a fraud and a liar; you are soulless and an autocratic extortionist. You have found my elevatory deception and I have found yours, you waste your intellect being a ruthless demonic repudiator. You care not for the pure truth only your version of it, using your status as a ruinous club. So now, as a legacy, I give you something into which you may sink your rapacious teeth. I now put you at mortal risk. There will be no safety in your red leather chair, or ebony desk, surrounded by precious mementos, glorifying your intellect and status. I put you into life, into the ugliness of a world of which you know little to nothing Doctor - in an existentially dour and horrible world.

Here then is the story. Some of this tale you know because you are the author of much of it. As you know I had befriended a writer of horror fiction. His fiction intrigued me and is uniquely disturbing; all of his books dealt with the dangerous unseen. Such plot lines, entangled in the workings of the id, I find fascinating even if the author is unenlightened and pedestrian. The subject is sufficient to my baser curiosity; certainly,

perverse but if I do not delude myself, harmless. Each book's protagonists were targeted by what amounted to monsters under the bed. I had met the man socially and liked him very much. We lived only a few blocks apart. One evening at dinner he asked me if I knew of another author who had written of the abduction phenomena, and that this same author was brave enough to write of his own experience. I said I had, in passing, but I personally do not take the whole UFO genre with much seriousness. He confided that he too was an abductee. I was astonished that such a bright and seemingly stable man could fall prey to such delusions. He continued to share, in detail, his experience and always with insightful Jungian connections. I was 'you', Doctor, I could hear nothing as true and real, but God help me, it was still compelling. I diminished and insulted my friend with a smirk and a written prescription. He handed back the chit and laughed at me. Rising, he said he would send me some documents to peruse, chuckled, slapped my back and left. I was stuck, rightly, with the tab. I feared I had lost a most interesting friend to whom I had developed some affection.

That next Friday afternoon a box arrived at my home, in it were several thick files. I took the time to look through them, recognizing many prominent and respected names. No sleep came that night, dear Doctor. I read each case and was mesmerized. Some of the work was sloppy and verging on irresponsible, given the extraordinary nature of the subject matter and the new ground it covered, some latitude had to be given for the wellbeing of the patient. The extent and clarity of each patient's experience startled me for its honesty and apparent sincerity. If this was Jung's archetype, rooted in the collective consciousness, and then blithely dismissed as a cultural phenomenon due to societal stresses, he never read these files. Seeing and photographing UFO's in Sweden or writing the creed of a new religion, coming from telepathic Venusians, was easy to dismiss in a thousand ways, whether it was true or not. These files described experiences of abductions, terrifying and painful examinations performed by beings other than human; other experiences, often verified, of lost time, implants, scars, and pregnancies started and abruptly terminated filled the pages. Many of the stories did not even mention UFO's as part of the experience. Individually they could be dismissed as schizophrenic manifestation, paranoid delusion, a neurological disorder, or a malfunction of the frontal lobes. But taken in a statistical context, based on worldwide experiential similarities, it speaks to a wider and more profound mystery. At the end of the night, I didn't know if I was convinced enough to dare any hypothesis. In other words, I gave up and suffered a protracted bout with depression. My practice was stalled under a barrage of excuses to my secretary, and my clients were shuffled off to less qualified others. I, the self -proclaimed genius with a lie for a name, was bleak over the worry of the impossible. All I believed to be true was unraveling under the sufferings of those whose lives were shredded and alienated by what you and I would have bet was no more or less than an encephalopathy. I stood at the edge of an existential abyss.

When I was at my worst, you, in primal cruelty and with the darkest humor, sent me Jamie Owens. She knocked on my door, at my home, and I answered looking like a wraith. She shook my hand nonplused, walking by me, and finding my disheveled office threw some papers off a chair and sat. I stripped off my housecoat, put on a jacket, and followed her. She spoke before I did. She said that you, Doctor, were an insufferable ass, I laughed aloud and concurred. She then asked me if I could help her. All I could do, in better humor than I had experienced in days, was nod.

She was thirty-four, 120 lbs. and according to her med records, which she handed to me briskly, was indeed a healthy young woman. She continued to volunteer information, which I jotted down and, with permission, recorded. She considered herself Afro-American although her father was white. She graduated Harvard law, well read, married 14 years - she professed a mostly happy and balanced sexuality, but often found her husband too demanding and selfish - no children yet - apartment in Manhattan and a house in the woods in upper state New York. She often suffered anxiety attacks, fatigue, constipation, and general flu-like symptoms. She had gone through Doctors like a scythe through a wheat field and had every test possible, with inconclusive results. She was advised to seek psychiatric assistance. She reluctantly went to you, confided the truth and you, knowing of my new hobby and with total disregard for your Hippocratic Oath, sent her to me as a joke. In spite of your cavalier and despicable disregard for professional ethics, I took her as my only patient, willingly, to help her and to damage you, that intention being unethical as well. Even so, it didn't work out the way I planned.

Ms. Owens was forthright. She expressed a belief that her condition was related to the aftereffects of the visitations and abductions she endured. After the first passionate outburst she sat stiffly and stared at me. I responded that I was well versed in the abduction phenomena, which was now true, and believed I could help her, which was not. She visibly relaxed. When I began to explain how I would like to proceed she stopped me and requested that she be able to share every aspect of her experience, first, without any input from me, and then when she was done, I could respond. Since I was making it all up anyway, I agreed. She avowed a sincere belief that each instance of visitation corresponded to each of her symptoms. She could find no tangible thread and hoped that in the listening I might see the connections. I did not reveal to her that in this partnership I might be able to make sense of both our dilemmas.

The process went well as I had only hoped.

Ms. Owens had her first known sighting two years ago. She had to work late in the city and her husband had driven up to their retreat in the woods earlier that day to do some work on the property. The road to the cabin was desolate once one left the highway. It was two in the morning and she was musing over her actions on a difficult case. She claimed to be blasted by a brilliant light that startled her from her reverie. The light she described as being impossibly bright. It was all she could do to stop the car and climb out to acquire a better view of what she described as a craft. The manifestation was of a size not easily discerned. It seemed to float silently above her, about thirty feet from the top of the car. She could make out a circle of red lights some fifty feet in diameter. The interior was comprised of a tight cluster of white blazing lights, with a brighter spot exactly in the center. Ms. Owen said she felt no fear, only an oddly relaxed curiosity. It hovered for what seemed a few minutes then headed straight up in a flash and was gone. Laughter and astonishment was her only reaction. She covered her mouth, after telling me the story, and began to giggle demurely, and then burst out into laughter with what appeared to be relief. I let her compose herself without a comment, as was our agreement. She continued the accounting of events, after apologizing and wiping her eyes.

Arriving at the cabin, later that evening, she worried about telling of what had transpired to her very conservative husband and decided to keep it to herself. Disarming the alarm, she entered a dark uninviting house. She was inexplicably disturbed, and then

became alarmed, she said that she had the feeling that an intruder had somehow entered the house; she retrieved a hidden pistol from a cabinet next to the front door. Bravely running upstairs, she switched on the light to their bedroom. The bed had been slept in but was now empty. She called for her husband. He did not answer. Composing herself she went downstairs and used the kitchen's landline to call her husband's cell. She heard it ring in the living room. Hanging up the phone she ran into the living room. A fire was made earlier, but now was only embers. The clock chimed five, making her stand in bewilderment. That could not be right it would not have taken that long to get here, the drive usually taking three hours. Where had the time gone? Bright flashes of light outside the windows made her turn her head. Thinking again of her husband, she ran upstairs, the light in the bedroom had been turned off. She switched them on to find her husband lying on his back snoring, loudly. He never snored. At this point in the narrative, she insisted I know just how odd it was that her husband was snoring. I'm afraid, Dear Doctor, that I lost my professional demeanor, albeit, only for a moment. She begged me to acknowledge the fact, as she presented it, as the foundation for the truth and validity of the whole story. Doctor, she was right to focus on the familiar and tangible, and the fact, that she did, allowed me to find the whole narrative credible. I told her I believed her and begged her to continue the story the next session on the following day.

The next day she was a different person. Red eyed and visibly exhausted, she spoke haltingly and cried often. She tried to tell me of the following summer, but the words stuck in her throat. At that point I decided to offer hypnosis by way of assistance.

Doctor, I know you disavow any use of hypnosis as a therapeutic tool. However, in her state, even if it only helped her to relax, the benefit outweighed any gain toward her recovery. I professed to her no great expertise. She was willing, and it didn't take long to have her in a deep state of relaxation. I asked her to go back to her cabin last summer and tell me what had transpired that had caused her such vexation. She started to tremble and I reminded her she was perfectly safe. She was only observing and no harm could come to her. I asked her to relax and tell me about the eventful trip home. She said they had done a lot of work on the cabin, a source of happiness to her. After the incident, her deteriorating state of health had become a problem, and little was done. Her husband was supportive of every effort to find a cause. She demanded they stay at the cabin and her husband took three weeks off his job to be with her, hoping that it would help. It did. She had more energy each morning she awoke. Within a week she was alive and vital. Her husband benefited by her newfound love of life. She giggled and confessed that she was constantly horny and considering the privacy of their cabin, she ambushed her husband often, no matter where they were. This was not the behavior of an otherwise shy and somewhat repressed person, but she said that she needed a baby, and had become obsessed with the idea. She never shared the thought with her husband. He was content that she behaved like a wanton, and she stated that it suited her as well. I asked if anything else unusual happened during their stay.

She became quiet. I asked where she was. In a quiet voice she said she was in bed. It was dark and her husband was snoring. She could not move and began to panic. I told her to breathe and relax. She did. Her eyes, able to move, looked to the left side where she observed her husband being lowered into bed. A voice said:

"Do not worry, your husband is fine and will remember nothing."

She caught movement to her right and abruptly stopped talking. I asked her what she saw. I reminded her she was safe. She let out a loud sigh. She said that a horror of a creature, with large eyes, and a large head had bent down within inches of her face. The creature spoke in her mind.

It spoke. "Why are you awake? We don't need you."

And then she was out, blinking and staring at me.

At this point, you will be amused Doctor, I felt as if I was over my head. I called Dr. Jean Lyman; I had used her in difficult regression cases. I told her about the case and asked her help, she agreed, with a caveat she would share over dinner, I agreed.

The dinner was pleasant and the first time I had been out of my apartment for far too long. Over an aperitif she said she was thrilled concerning my delving into this field. She felt my credibility would add weight to the premise and argument. She then said that she had a theory that there was something much deeper going on than just alien abduction. She promised that her professional involvement would not be colored by her hypothesis.

I agreed and that was our doom.

You have already read the newspaper's account of her terrible death. She did not cut her wrists in a bathtub, and her husband did not have a heart attack, she and he were most assuredly assisted in those wasteful acts, and that is also a part of this story.

While we worked together Dr. Lyman poured over every file sent to me by my writer friend, and the recorded accounts of my sessions. I was complimented on my technique. She insisted, with some vigor, we continue sessions, with Ms. Owens, as soon as was possible. I was concerned at the look in her eyes.

Jamie Owens was enthusiastic at the prospect of a deeper understanding of her experience she went under quite easily, and Dr. Lyman started where I left off.

Ms. Owens began her narrative.

Upon seeing the creature and hearing its words she had closed her eyes. The creature had apparently changed its mind. She felt herself lifting off the bed. Opening her eyes, she was bathed in light, making everything in the room indistinct. The light, she commented, could be felt as if fingers of electricity were crawling all over her body. At this point she paused in the account, flushing quite visibly. She smiled and said she was naked but didn't remember when that had occurred. She was sure she was wearing a nightgown her mother had given her for Christmas. With Dr. Lyman’s urging, she continued. The light delivered her into a white room and on to a table not dissimilar to a medical examination table. The room was a featureless white, without a visible source of light. She noted smaller creature's scurrying around busily. The largest being came over to her again and touched her arm. She sensed that it was telling her that they were going to do procedures on her, and that there may be some discomfort, but that all would be well. A large device, with multiple instruments attached, lowered from a hidden area in the ceiling. She saw two thin, needle-like, probes enter into her nose. She tried to scream, and move out of the way, she could do neither. She felt a horrible popping noise along with a sharp pain as the devices pushed deep into her skull. The sensation felt like vertigo

that never quite developed. The instruments retracted and the whole device moved back up into the ceiling and disappeared. The warmth of blood ran from her nose, and being unable to move, she was incapable of wiping it away. The taller creature moved over to her and put his hand gently on the outer lips of her vagina. She gasped. Dr. Lyman spoke quietly, telling her she was safe and that she was only observing an event, no harm would come to her, and to not be afraid. Ms. Owens continued after a deep breath. The "Gray" spread her vaginal lips, fixing a thumb on her clitoris.

It was the first time she used the word Gray to describe the creature. It gave me pause. I tapped Dr. Lyman motioning her to move away from our patient. She turned to Ms. Owens, told her to sleep, and that she would be right back.

When she came to me, she was angry. I told her to relax. I informed her that letting the patient sleep would do no harm. She called me a name and informed me that we may lose the memory string. Ignoring the comment, I said that I believed the whole incident to be a fraud. Explaining that in previous conversations I had found a possibility that the whole story was a cover. Dr. Lyman agreed which set me back. I explained to her that I found Ms. Owens to be strong willed, brilliant, and had a need to control her environment. She was sexually repressed and was conflicted about starting a family or staying with a very lucrative career. Dr. Lyman pointed out that I had just described seventy-five percent of all women. Her sarcasm aside, I said that I believed the next part of the session would dispel the abduction scenario for a more common, if no less crippling, series of incidents. She looked at me then blurted out an astounding theory that the UFO, and abduction, scenario was a cover memory for an occult-based event. She quickly revealed that she knew that Mr. and Ms. Owens had dappled in the occult.

It was you, good Doctor, who told her and you, Sir, will get all you have coming for such an offensive ethical and moral breach. I, in spite of my own reservations, allowed Dr. Lyman to continue. She furthered her theory, as I learned, based in a Christian Ethos. She believed that those who seek answers in the occult (I translated non-Christian), with college educations and high IQs, the more the mathematical probability that such UFO incidents will be experienced, inaccurate generalizations aside She claimed, with only subjective proof, that the Paradigm was a deviance of the mind, created by forces much older than any alien civilization. She smiled and whispered for effect …Dark Angels and the Great Deceiver. She turned around, not waiting for a response, and went back to our patient leaving me in shock and dismay. I don't know why it bothered me. I was willing to except the improbable, why not the fantastic? Could a Gray be a Dark Angel? Would the failure of science in this matter be more easily explained in the supernatural? Where Physics fails, could Metaphysics be a better place to find the truth and, I feared, subsequent madness. As I would discover, Dear Doctor, madness has many addresses.

I walked back in. Dr. Lyman waited for me by further soothing Ms. Owens. I had begun to unravel and felt off balance but allowed Dr. Lyman to continue. I felt that no harm would come to our patient. Whatever the foundation for the illness, its revelation would promise the possibility for a cure, or at least a lessening, or suspension, of the symptoms.

Mrs. Owens continued her story. The Gray, she said, began to masturbate her with nothing less than mastery. The Gray moved between her legs. She feared she would be raped, although a part of her demanded it. One orgasm after another rolled over her, leaving her exhausted. She felt that she should feel ashamed of the violation but couldn't.

A voice in her mind said, "You are welcome - you deserved it."

The Gray was handed a pointed tool. She was told there would be no pain, but they wanted to test her uterus. The device only stung slightly. A fog suddenly covered her and she found herself naked on her bed. She bolted to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, in horror, at the blood on her face. She sat on the toilet and examined her belly button and her vagina; it was swollen and wet. Her clitoris stood at attention; pelvic muscles still throbbed from the orgasms. She cleaned up, ran into the bedroom and looked down at her sleeping husband. She dropped her head and spoke in obvious shame at what she did next. She raped her husband. First, she woke him with fellatio, something repugnant to her, when she had achieved what she needed she mounted him and gave him the night of his life. She never told her husband of the encounter and didn't tell him of the subsequent abortion.

We ended the session.

I spent time the next morning with Dr. Lyman, who presented her theory to me in depth. There was validity in her thinking, and after having a cognac-blurred night I was thrilled that there was some science, perhaps even better science than the other side presented. It was little green men against demons and devils – lions, tigers, and bears. - Oh-me! You were having your way with me Doctor, you bastard. And I was too far in to save Dr. Lyman, her wonderful husband, you, or myself.

A few days later Ms. Owens called in an exuberant mood, touting the benefits of the sessions. I warned her that it may only be a temporary situation, and not to give up on our sessions. She whole heartily agreed and asked if I would speak to her husband. I agreed. The meeting with her and her husband, Ben, went very well. He told me that he listened to his wife's version of events. He was skeptical yet was open to a continuation of therapy and had the greatest respect and confidence in me. Ms. Owens asked if Dr. Lyman and I would come to their cabin, for the weekend, for another hypnosis session. Mr. Owens would not attend but gave his gracious assent.

I made arrangements and we were on our way early Saturday morning. The trip was pleasant and scenic. The cabin was very secluded and quite rustic, with a primitive split log exterior façade; however, the interior was modern and beautifully decorated. We had a late lunch of salad, hard roll, cheese, cold cuts, and a wonderful Riesling.

We finished our wine on the deck overlooking a verdant canyon, with light and undirected conversation. The Owens' had installed cameras, and sensing systems, around the house and I was shown the controls, should a need come to turn off alarms, or contact the Ranger station.

As the sun was going down Ms. Owens asked if we were ready. We said we were and very shortly Ms. Owens was lying on her bed, in-trance, and ready.

Dr. Lyman did not start her questions with the abduction. She surprised me and took another tack. She regressed Ms. Owens to the night of the UFO sighting. She did not

seem to care about the road event but centered on what happened when she went to bed that night. She asked for tiny and minute details. Where were their bodies on the bed? What was the temperature? What were her dreams? What sounds and movements did her husband make? Then Ms. Owens remembered a sting behind her ear. I made a note. Dr. Lyman moved her ahead to the night of the abduction. She was moved again to remember every detail. She felt again a sting behind her ear and another on the bottom of her foot. Her husband yelped in his sleep then settled down. The Doctor shifted again to questions of details in the room, mirror on the table, type of material on the lamp shade, what perfume she wore, what cologne her husband was wearing, count the number of times her husband breathed in a minute, what did she see in the corner? Ms. Owens stiffened and went mute. Dr. Lyman asked my help. She asked me to grip her feet while she put her hands under the women's shoulders. She then asked me to lift, I was taken aback; our charge seemed to have little weight as she rose easily into the air. When we lowered her to the bed her breathing was even and steady. Dr. Lyman head nodded for me to leave the room with her.

She explained to me that what she was doing was focusing on the reality of those evenings, outside the influence of the manufactured drama. She begged me to be open-minded; she explained that what she expected was for the demon to show itself. I begged her to not use that word and that the idea of Roman Catholic supermundane erudition was repugnant to me and not in the best interest of our patient. I accused her of sophistry and working to her own ends, an agenda, without regard for truth or its discovery. I further threatened to remove her from the case. She only smiled and, with a raised hand, asked my forgiveness. She asked if I believed that Ms. Owens had seen an UFO, or if there was an abduction event? I answered the first was possible, the later, doubtful, given what we knew. She continued. She believed that the stress and demands of life were grinding people under in this too-fast world. In fact, the world was diminishing the value of each individual by allowing no way to win. She suggested the fall of any society was rooted in the false ideal of sameness. The individual mind finds no place to find peace; there is no place to rest. There is no redemption in a secular world, and we all embrace its demands, terrors and stresses, in spite of its lies and fraud. We can't fight, we can't stand, and we can't run away. We are vulnerable and unprotected to the whims of an uncaring universe. She scolded me that in calling her argument sophistry only pointed to my hypocrisy. She further accused me of loving more those riches my practice provides than the work of relief and cure of my patients.

Touché.

Rebuked, I asked as to where this would go. She said to have faith and let’s see. Imagine that, Doctor, faith?

We went back into the bedroom; Ms. Owens was still stiff. She slept deeply. Dr. Lyman asked her what was happening. She started to describe the Gray…then looked down at her feet and screamed. Dr. Lyman looked at me with shock on her face. This reaction wasn't expected. She whispered in our patient's ear that she must stop screaming and relax; no harm would come to her. Ms. Owens relaxed, but continued to breathe heavily. Dr. Lyman asked her to close her internal eyes and calm herself. When her breathing settled, she asked Ms. Owens what she had seen.

She said in a little girl voice. “…Big bug!"

Julie (It was the first time Dr. Lyman had used her familiar name.)” Julie? What do you see?”

"…A bug climbing up on me."

Dr. Lyman shrugged her shoulders at me. I nodded for her to continue.

At this point Doctor I'm going to quote her words exactly as she spoke them. There is no worry now for you, or I, over something as trivial as legal liability.

"What does it look like?"

"A huge cockroach…I hate cockroaches!"

"Can you look at it, and feel safe?"

"Yes…it's climbing up on me… and it’s cutting off my nightgown. It's not laying on me - it's arched over me…Oh no! The eyes are talking to me…black eyes …big black eyes."

"Are you safe?"

"Yes… it has stuck two stingers into my nose …it hurts!

"You are all right… you are safe!"

Jamie jumped…and howled. Dr. Lyman asked, "What happened?"

"A stinger was inserted in my belly button." Jamie went silent.

Dr. Lyman prodded, "What's happening now?"

"Can't - too awful!"

"Please tell me. It's like a movie…nothing can hurt you."

Doctor, I have to tell you that at this point I believed I was mistaken to choose Dr. Lyman. We had embarked on a course that was not going to turn out at all well. Here was the crossroads. If I let it go on, we would be stepping into this poor women's Kafkaesque nightmare. This tenebrous landscape was clearly sucking in my associate, and I was sure I too was on that same slippery slope. A mixture of terror and curiosity overcame me. Dr. Lyman looked at me, with sweat dripping off her face. One drop fell to the ground; I watched it fall in slow motion till it hit the carpet.

"It has a penis, or something like it, except it moves like an arm or a tentacle. It’s rubbing and tweaking my breasts…it’s kind of feels good. Now it's down there …I'm having orgasm after orgasm …it’s amazing! My ass just got squirted on … (she giggled) It's going up my butt, but I'm numb down there now. It's not bad… I would never let my husband do this… ever …too nasty. Maybe it would be okay to let him. (Long pause) It's gone."

I told her to forget everything. It was just a bad dream. She then told her to remember completely the alien abduction and to be proud of that wonderful and special experience. She then told her to sleep all night and wake refreshed, happy and pleased with all her choices.

I had no way to assimilate or explain what I had heard. Dr. Lyman on the other hand, did. She got up and went to the kitchen. Frantically she tore through the kitchen apparently attempting to make coffee. She stopped and slammed the counter. I had the recording device in my hand. Here is what she said:

"I have been a fool. I thought it was devils or demons …I was seeking the Arcanum like some religious inquisitor. I, for the sake of my newfound faith, did a volte - face on my training and discipline. I believed myself saved, but now I am doomed. Don't you see, Abraham? There are no demons here; they are constructs stored away in the dark deep subconscious memory of the human race. What we found is infinitely worse.

I was in the dark. I told her that what we heard was a delusion …nothing more.

"The UFOs …the abductions …the examinations …the sexual implications… mass sightings…geographical concentrations…cattle mutilations…incubus …aliens, fairies, elves, leprechauns, sirens, brownies, gnomes, on and on through our whole history. All archetypes based, not only in the subconscious, but tangible - in the real world as well. Dear Lord, I get it …I get it."

She slumped to the floor in a faint, and I ran over to her to be of assistance. She just stared at me. I thought she was in shock. My bag was on the chair in the living room. I jolted …I believed I saw something move behind the curtains. I didn't remember if we brought up a dog. Maybe a raccoon had got in when we were out on the porch. I noted an odd smell and immediately dismissed the idea that anything was in the house. I gave Dr. Lyman an injection of a mild sedative. Her eyes cleared and I helped her up. We both sat at the kitchen table.

"Don't you see Doctor? The sting to the neck is a peripheral nerve induction inhibitor. The sting to the foot is hallucinogenic. The creature is intelligent, and just injects the proper compound and the host sees and hears what the creature intends."

I heard the word 'host' and the pieces fell together. Horrified I began to pace in circles saying 'no' over and over.

"Abraham, the tentacle is an external birth canal. It's used to stimulate women so that the proper hormones are released in the blood. I believe there is a type for males, with a different appendage. The young must be placed in the rectum for a short time then expelled in our feces into the sewer systems. We must live in a symbiotic relationship… we always have - from the beginning. How perfect."

We both suffered the night.

The following morning, we told Ms. Owens, as far as we could tell, her memories were real and, if needed, she could visit an abduction group and talk about her experiences. She thanked us cheerfully. We ate breakfast and drove back to the city.

Two days later, Dr. Lyman and her husband were dead, and I was terrified.

I received a letter from Dr. Lyman post marked the day of her demise.

It read:

Dear Dr. Jennings,

Please forgive me for everything. It was Dr. Daniels intention to ruin you, and I was to be an accomplice. As you can see, I know of your, now, unimportant transgression. The impossible has happened yet again. I was visited last night, and my fate has been sealed. You are a good man and don't deserve what is about to happen. They told me that they must stay invisible and unknown. We humans have become too numerous, dangerous, irresponsible, and inquisitive. They have a plan to cull us to a more reasonable number. They have done it many times before. Just as they can manufacture dreams, they can also manufacture disease - custom viruses. Can you imagine? Put your affairs in order. Upon hearing the manner of my death, and the death of my dear husband, don't believe it. I was promised our deaths would be painless and even pleasurable. I still believe in a divine presence, and now I see how perfect His plan is.

Sincerely,

Jean Lyman

So, Dr. Daniels you have won and most assuredly lost.

I spent today putting my things in order. I have a poor cousin in Iowa who doesn't even know I exist, in either persona. She will be rich and will think there are Angels. I hope there are. How ironic that I gave such weight to my machinations and in the end, they meant nothing at all. As I write this, a large headed, skinny, Gray is reading over my shoulder. They allowed this last wish…to write this letter that will only be read by you. They agree that you are the instigator of this affair and revelation and, as such, are most guilty and responsible.

I was also allowed to call Jamie Owens. I told her all would be well for her and her husband. I said she would have no more abductions (a promise from the source.) and that in my opinion it was no more than a brain anomaly that occasionally happens to women who think they can do it all. I also said that I didn't rule out; however, the possibility that the UFO encounter was real. I told her my research showed that once the patient gains control, once more, the visitors seem to become uninterested. I prescribed more social time, to consider having a family, and a short-term anti-depressant. I referred her to another Doctor and wished her well.

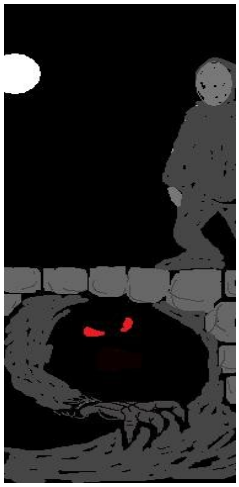
The universe is a lot larger than we had thought and more complex than we are able to fathom. Are there aliens? Most assuredly. Are they extraterrestrial? Perhaps some are. I will die peacefully (another promise). You will read this, and you will have a visit from Aliens that very night … you will, no doubt, go mad. But before you die (badly) you will know I was the instrument of your demise; you are arrogant, worthless, pompous ass.

Sincerely,

Dr. Abraham Moses Jennings

End

It so often feels as if evil is never punished, that somehow the greedy and violent have their way. It would give the good some comfort if there were some automatic method to cull the monsters from our midst – perhaps there is.



A Monster

In wait beneath the old north bridge
‘Tis common said that a monster lay
In wait for the deeds of foolish men
In need of what justice fails to pay

Sir, carry you not a hardened heart
And boldly walk the witch moon’s way
For teeth and claw will stop your stride
And rend your soul to ash and clay

Fear the monster that languish there
Beneath that bridge its hunger deep
Seeks it those who forget the past
And raise evil from imprisoned sleep

A chain it carries about its neck
To reign in misguided human prey
Craving the blood jewel upon its brow
Shine that holds heaven’s aid at bay

So, if your mind is wroth and sorely rank
Your guilty bowels writhe an angry pit
Stay clear the northern bridge, I say
Malice-born peril lay beneath it

How it all gets put together? What is reality? It is the eternal mystery, whether that investigation is perceived as the purview of Science, or Religion, is irrelevant when events turn lives upside down. The answer may not be solely in the science of forensics,

nor in the ceremony and dogma of faith, but in the machinations of a disheveled, and eccentric Detective.

GEORGE'S MONSTER

Special Agent George Silvers liked coffee. It was the only true constant in his life. He bought his own beans, ground them to a precise texture, and brewed each cup separately assuring the perfect flavor. That is where the Purest stopped and George stepped in. The coffee was then sweetened with three spoons of raw sugar and a double dollop of heavy crème. You couldn't label George as a compulsive because coffee was the only thing that he was compulsive about, and it was a ritual that George found important, a sane and civilized thing he needed to get up every day and do his job. His clothes were unimportant. He would eat most anything, as long as it came to him fast, and was of sufficient quantity to fill his belly. His grooming was hit and misses… so he kept two bottles of moderately priced cologne, one in his car, the other in his coat. The cologne was used to mask the neglect in his personal grooming and a rare acknowledgement of social responsibility. He despised working with others and the over-scent was his only concession to the societal conventions. Coffee mattered, as did his personal knowledge of a horrible world, where creatures roamed, and preyed upon the weak.

He lived alone. His apartment was mostly neat and unremarkably decorated. It had two bedrooms, his was unkempt, the other, used as an office, was messy in a piled and stacked up organized way. But its clutter was of files strewn across a large desk, walls filled with grisly photos of crime scenes, and bodies, mangled and disfigured in frightening ways. All were the works of monsters, and monsters were George's business. He hunted them, tracked them down, and put them away. If he was lucky, he got to kill them himself. It was the reason he stayed at the Bureau. He knew that he had a one in six chance of being able to put a bullet, or six, into the body of the worst kind of beast. Perhaps even dispatch them to hell with his 26-inch Louisville Slugger a gift from his Father. The same bat that his father had used to bashed in the head of a serial rapist and murderer who had broken into their home and had dire plans for George's mother. His mother died two years later of breast cancer; a drunk driver killed his policeman father a

year later. The irony never escaped him. He had taken a stand to become the predator of predators. And he was the best.

Serial killers were his bread and butter, the crème in his café. He was neither morbid, nor stoic; he was just particularly good at his job. And that job required him to look for clues, connections, insights, all found in the photos on these walls. In his line of work people became bodies, or parts of bodies. And being dead did not mean that their ability to communicate had stopped. George listened to the dead better than anyone did. From personal and firsthand experience, he knew that death is inevitable; it comes when, and how, it wishes. You could die in your sleep from a horrible nightmare, or you could just slip away quietly in that same night's sleep. You could pass peacefully and lonely, or violently in the company of others. It can be quick, or slow in coming. Whether it is a massive heart attack, or an angry knife through the liver, both could end a person, the result is the same. You may be prepared for its coming or waiting quaking in fear. You could die young. You could die old. But in the end, it is just the end. There are thousands of ways to die and of that George was aware in the truest existential way. His concern was not for the mundane death, but for those who die as unwilling players in grotesque plays, who would have otherwise died in some more natural fashion. Let God, or Fate, do the taking, not some demented bastard, warped into a twisted demon by pain or neglect. He could do nothing about that terrible result, except stop them from broadcasting their aberration, using the horrid death of innocents as a canvas for their expression. Too bad - oh well - tough shit - life sucks - way it goes - George had no pity for the demon, only a deadly resolve.

The call came at 11:00 p.m. he wasn't asleep. He was smoking the one and only cigarette he allowed himself each day and it irritated him that he should be disturbed.

He barked, his Section Chief, quite used to George's behaviors, continued undaunted. George got the particulars, put on his shoes and his rumbled topcoat and drove to the scene.

It was 4:00 a.m. He walked his tired raggedy ass to the yellow tape running between two concrete pillars, inside the factory, in the dark middle of New Jersey.

He stood as if it was SRO at a surreal play, but this scene was all wrong. The crime scene was immense. Blood was strewn everywhere, there were great black slashes of burnt ash on the walls, and glass fragments covered the floor, interlaced with, what appeared to be long scratches in the concrete floor. George noticed the broken window 30 feet up the back wall. There were two piles in the center of the floor, one - a neatly folded stack of clothes, the other - a pile of bloody bones, ribs and spine, clearly human. At the top of the second pile where two bloody hands folded over each other. A wedding ring was still on the left hand. On top of the hands was a perfectly cleaned skull, with the bone crown cut out in a perfect circle. There was no flesh apparent, except on the severed and posed hands. There were no organs, or entrails. In an odd and grotesque way, it was weirdly tidy.

George fell cross-legged to the floor. The forensic team stood behind him in equal revulsion. The photographer, blues, and detective suits all stood back and waited for his word. All George could say was "Jesus wept!"

Minutes passed as George looked over the scene from his unique position. Finally, he stood up and called over the photographer, ordering her to be extensive."… leave nothing out! Shoot every fucking inch." He raved.

He waved at the others, none all that eager to start, but moved by the anger and passion of their boss.

"All reports on my desk by 5:00 tonight. This is now a no shit 'George Case'. Get busy!"

They all knew what he meant.

***

He stretched and rubbed his stomach. He was satisfied and purred with pleasure. He wasn't done sleeping, but had risen for a moment, feeling a cunning intellect at work upon the problem he had created. A giggle arose from inside him, causing him to shudder with delicious pleasure. He was new and, on the way, to becoming. Confidence steeled his heart; he was ready for the test. He reached out with his mind and felt that tired, but soaring Intellect not yet knowing whom he sought. He smiled and purred deeper. It was wonderful. This event brought fullness to his life. He drifted off to sleep, thinking contently of the cunning Special Agent Silver, and the richness of his own new life.

***

Agent George Silver stood looking in the mirror. He sighed, a sound that encompassed the 'giving-up' that an uncaring world heaped on its sad and weary denizens. George looked at his broken nose and juggy ears and thought of a God, the one with such a clear sense of humor.

He wasn't a pretty man, his eyes were too big, and his lips too thin. He climbed in the shower recognizing that it had been too long since the last one. Two minutes later, with all the strategic parts lathered and rinsed, he climbed out and again looked upon his unshaven visage. He didn't look the part of an FBI Agent. His Ph.D., unfailing instincts, and not so finally hewn social skills, slammed open unwilling doors. He chuckled. He knew what people thought of him, and he could care less. The person in the mirror was well muscled, trained, and strong; all of it was hidden under the 'laundry-basket' style contrived to have people discount him. His own focus was total. People, those who are alive and breathing, are easily distracted, inherently needy, and therefore annoying. He purposely repelled them with his mien and behavior. He only demanded their attention when he spoke and nothing but the best was expected. There would be no silly platitudes or artifice with those in his charge. When the job was done correctly people didn't die and when they were sloppy, then there were photos on George's wall. He kept them there as a reminder to never drop his guard. People were asleep and wrongly believed that in this modern world the darkness was no longer a danger.

They are all wrong.

He pressed down the plunger that forced the coffee grounds to the bottom of the vessel.

The poured coffee steamed a delightful aroma into the air. Kona was his choice; rich and deep. He sat at the kitchen table and prepared the brew. He glanced at his watch

then sipped the sweet concoction, with obvious satisfaction. The phone rang he didn't answer. It was 7:40 am they should have called him at 7:00. He knew all the reports were delivered on time the night before and they had been pored over. His associates were stumped, which is why he wasn't called on time. Someone of a startling intelligence did this crime and it was done to piss George off. "Rock star serial killers were the worst and the most dangerous," he thought.

George decided not to call in. he would go in and allow the briefing. He would listen to the truths, and to the suppositions. He would say nothing, and that would terrorize his subordinates. And sadly, he would wait.

***

Special Agent Silver waits, as he should. And the hunger grows. He had broken into a library and browsed the books learning and expanding. The computer was a revelation. Once the basis of the device was understood it poured treasure into his eager mind. It didn't take long to find his nemeses, Special Agent Silver. He read George's personal file, learned, and marveled. He must not underestimate his foe. The next event will be designed very carefully to honor this magnificent adversary.

***

George watched the house burn. It was a glorious destruction. Firemen ran to and fro, hosing a nonplused conflagration. This fire would have its way until it was done. A police Lieutenant tapped George lightly on the shoulder as if he were afraid, he wouldn't get his hand back. He gestured to a waiting car. It was a short trip, without words, around the block to an alley that gave access to the back of the property. This was an upscale neighborhood in Rochester, New York. The lots were an acre and a half or bigger. To the front of this property the house crackled and snapped. It was amusing somehow as to why he was invited to watch a house burn. He soon learned. At the back of the property Police and Bureau cars surrounded a large barn-like structure. George was ushered over to a yellow taped door. The smell hit him like a wall. He took out a handkerchief and a small bottle of cologne. He tore down the tape and stopped to splash the cologne on the cloth. He opened the door and using the handkerchief found the light switch. Then putting the cloth over his nose walked in. A scene from the lower levels of Hell assailed him. In the center of the room was a pile of bones. The bones were not picked clean, connective tissue held together recognizable parts: rib cages, spines, hips, legs, arms and skulls. Two small skulls and two adult skulls lay in a family line; the epidermis was stripped away, with the underlying muscle tissue exposed. The eyes still intact stared at the door … stared with horrible accusation at George. The innocent and unprepared family from the front house, he supposed. From the rafters hung intestine cut and tied at each end. Hanging there like grotesque party streamers. There were no organs and most of the muscle tissue was missing. There was also a conspicuous lack of blood, and no scorch marks like the other scene. He carefully walked the room noting every detail. He spoke to no one just nodded to the forensic boys who grimly went to work.

"I've never seen anything like this …I don't…."

"Just do your job Lieutenant that's all there is now to do."

"Special Agent Silver do you ever get used to it?"

"Go to work! What in the name of hell is there to get used to?"

George walked to the back of the house, sat down on a lawn chair and watched the house burn, lighting up the night. He spoke to no one till the flame was almost extinguished. But a Fireman heard him say to himself, "Nicely done, you fucker. The fire is a nice touch."

It gave the Fireman a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

***

The edge on him was getting uncomfortable. There was no worthy female. The hunger was usually stronger than the pull in his loins. The becoming was sublime and when he fed again the change would be inevitable. He had read something of value in the Library and had further studied the subject on the Internet. It didn't please him, it was to be a necessary perversion, but he would do what he must, even if relieving himself felt unnatural, a sin. A rush of pleasant waves coursed through his spine, to his groin and then to his brain. He thought of Silver and his eyes sparkled at the anticipation of the chase.

***

The briefing, from the first warehouse scene, was long and occasionally enlightening. Dental records and the fingerprints on the folded hands allowed Forensics to identify the remains. The victim was David Durham a stockbroker who had lived in Manhattan. He had left his wife a week prior to the discovery of the remains. His business trip had not gone at all well. His Town Car was found stripped in an alley in the Bronx. The scorch marks were just that; scorch marks, apparently done by a blowtorch. The ash composition was made up of paint residue, carbon, and burnt concrete- silica; created with extreme temperature for no evident reason. The blood was from the victim; no finger-painting just flung in an artistic fashion. There were no other fingerprints and no footprints. The blood intrigued George.

The speaker continued, "It must have been exsanguinated before the victim died then brought to the scene. The major muscle masses were expertly removed, not like a butcher, but also not like a surgeon."

The organs were removed, including the brain a la Hannibal. All done without a single clue to the identity of the Perp. George thought.

"What of the car?" George interrupted much to the obvious chagrin of the speaker.

George mussed, "…too impressed with his presentation - not on the material. I'll have a chat with him later."

"If there was a struggle or bloodshed, in the car, we found no trace of any biological residue… except prints. We have prints from the car. The car was cleaned and stripped of everything remotely valuable…we believe…later." The Agent looked nervous. George let him stew a bit.

"Go on, Agent Watson, you are doing fine." George slurred an English accent for effect.

Agent Watson knew his boss well enough to know that what he did was not meant as an insult, but designed to get him out of his head and in the mind of the Perp. He stared at the boards in front of him.

"All of you!" George yelled. “All of you are missing the point. Think …not one person?"

George stood up. “…No one here has got here, with me, without being more than bright and more than intuitive."

Everyone was awake now. George walked over to the boards.

"Goddam it… look! There are no fucking clues."

George walked back to his seat and calmly crossed his legs. Watson looked at him then at the board then back at George then the light came on.

"Dear Lord… thieves didn’t strip the car… the Perp did. But he waited for the thieves to start so their prints would be on the car." Watson pointed at a man in the back. "Get me the names of those hoodlums from the prints and then start looking for their bodies."

George stood and walked out. Watson sat down and sighed. Working for George was tough. The others sat and waited until Watson gathered himself.

An attractive, crisp and tidy woman stood and asked Watson if she could give her presentation on the second scene. With his approval Agent Petres passed out folders just as George walked back in the room with a cup of coffee and his thermos. Agent Petres cleared her throat after giving a quick glance at George she started her presentation.

"The house was torched - no apparent hot spot - no device - probably kerosene - in the living room. All evidence of the murder was obliterated. It’s a high probability that the murders were done in the house. No ceremony - clean and fast while they slept. The scene in the garage was staged with similarity to the first event. Same Perp. The garage was spotless - no extraneous blood, fluids or excrement. The victims were named Drake; Dan-41, Diane –36, Dana –13, and Dennis-10. The neighbors heard or saw nothing. Diane called her mother at 9:00 p.m.… they talked for two hours. Fire Chief believes the fire was started between 1: 00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m."

"Fast worker, isn’t he?" George offered.

"Yes…"

"Purposeful?"

"Theater and something else."

Petres responded in a very professional manner. Murmurs of approval arose from her peers. Petres smiled.

"What are you smiling at Petres? You are here because you are the best with the best. If you are looking for strokes go back to the Des Moines Police Department. As for the rest of you, she may be the new guy, but it is you who should be seeking her approval. If you have contained yourself Petres …continue."

George never moved a muscle or changed the tone of his voice. A young man came in with a greasy bag; George paid him, sending him on his way and unwrapped the burger and fries. He stuffed his face. Petres continued as if nothing was happening. George grinned through his mouthful of fries.

"Do you have any ideas as to a way for us to proceed?" George said as he wiped his mouth.

"The D name fixation is interesting. And I believe he eats his victims. We need to look for a freezer full of steaks and roasts. Other than that, he has a sense of humor." Petres stood quietly waiting for George to respond.

"Dammit Petres, get the fuck on with it. I know what I think and I'm not interested in reiterating my thoughts out loud …tell me what you think. What is so funny about this asshole?"

"The intestines were party decorations - he's careful - artful. But it's not ritualistic, it's spontaneous - he makes it up as he goes. He's doing it for you Special Agent Silvers, he's knows who you are, but he's not trying to impress you. The hands, they are your hands in it- in the game - the wedding ring - you and he are sacredly linked. He's being spectacular - because it is you. Nothing mundane will do - so it's art, but it's mocking - not you or us - he's mocking death, mocking the ritual, making fun - making a joke."

"Is he done", George slurped his soda, "…making jokes, Agent Peters?"

"No - not until you get it."

***

Masturbating was repugnant to him, but it was necessary. He ejaculated into small bottles every four hours for the last three days. The bottles he placed on ice blocks he had found in the freezer room. Huge slabs of beef hung from hooks. It was amusing to swing them and watch them collide creating a random rhythm. The town of Cicero was a problem. Ten men had earlier surprised him while he rested. They all died. He couldn't bring himself to eat any part of them. They shot at him and that was annoying. They smelled of evil and that he couldn't abide. He cleaned up and put them in dumpsters a few miles away. It wouldn't do to have The Silver thinking he was immoral, that would cloud the issue. All of this was too important. He had locked up the building and now felt reasonably safe. The meatpacking plant, he hid in, was a front for the men he had killed. It was an unfortunate event, but fate often plays in such matters. Such evil was despicable and needs be handled. It made him feel useful that the heavens would call on him for assistance- things will change and this was a clear sign, an omen, and it pleased him to be of service. The beef tempted him, but Silver expected a natural killing in four weeks and he shall wait so Silver will have it.

***

George sat at the computer searching the net for anomalous crime reports. It was often a waste of time, but it served to anneal his thinking, allowing winged ideas to connect where connection would not be normally possible. He snapped back and thanked a caring God. Here it was - the Chicago Police Department, ten victims, throats slit,

dumped in a dumpster. Ten bosses of a notorious crime family wiped out and all at one time. All the corpses were bloodless and neatly wrapped in burlap. There wasn't any real interest in an investigation based on what he was reading - no prints - no real clues.

"Ran into a little snag, did you? We found what you left of the car thieves - one was a heroin addict - you washed him and left him whole; you butchered the other, only taking what you needed. Wrapped them up for me - my present. That was planned. "George sipped the Guatemalan Blend he had bought this afternoon. "Those bad boys in Chicago, did you surprise them or they you? It was a glitch, unexpected, but you still had to do it correctly - so I could see it. You're moving west - what's there my friend - what's there?"

He clicked on a cheap tickets web site and bought some not so cheap tickets for a flight out in the morning. He finished his coffee and decided to take a shower and a shave. They know him around here, but the Chicago folks might need a snappy and true first impression.

***

For one born in the desert he didn't care that much for the heat. He traveled by night when it was cool. The beautiful Lexus he stole had air, and his semen was safely stored in an ice chest in the back seat, right next to another chest that held cooled meat cut in convenient chunks for snacking on the road. He had spray painted the side windows a dull black for privacy. Driving the speed limit was tiresome, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself. He rolled down the window just as a black and white moved up beside him. On seeing him, the cops put on their siren and slowed down to pull behind him. He was bored anyway and they brought it on themselves. He pulled to the side of the road and stopped. Laughter rolled pleasantly out of his throat, at least there would be some amusement on this tedious trip.

The Deputy's pulled behind him. They checked the plates - stolen vehicle. The driver whispered as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "Black window - a guy in a hood - butt-ugly gang-banger, snorting and sniffing - probably armed - carrying drugs. If we are careful - this could be a career bust." They got out of their Cruiser with practiced authority and pulled back their gun straps and released the safeties. The driver side Cop unexpectedly passed gas, noisily, in the excitement of the moment. He heard a loud guffaw from the Lexus.

"OK asshole. I'll show you funny."

Both men pulled their guns and yelled simultaneously "Step out of the car, please!"

The car thief did just that. Both Officers stared in disbelief, and both drew up their guns. They both died with a gurgle that should have been a scream.

He had picked this route for its vast emptiness. This was a delightful diversion. As was his style he acted quickly. He picked up the two men and buried them in a shallow grave off the road. Going back, he climbed into the Police Cruiser and drove to a graded road a short distance ahead. He turned into the sand so the car couldn't be seen from the road. Threw sand on the top to disguise it from above and punctured the tires because he was annoyed. He walked back to the road and stopped. In the distance he saw a tow-truck

driver hooking up the Lexus. His back hurt, as it should. Shrugging he ran toward his car. The tow truck began to pull out when he caught up. Climbing up and over the car and on to the tow truck he reached around through the open window and tore out the driver's throat. Anger rolled through him. This was too complicated. He kicked the driver over and climbed through the window, applying the brakes to the truck. It didn't take him long to release the Lexus. The precious cargo in the back seat was untouched. Satisfied to its safety, he went back to give that tow truck driver a bit of very angry attention. All of this was taking too much time and was no longer fun. The sun would soon be up and he preferred working in the dark.

***

The tow truck was found the next day at two in the afternoon and one hundred twenty degrees. The remains, of the apparent driver, were strewn throughout the cabin of the truck. The vehicle was towed to a cold storage facility for the protection of evidence and the comfort of the forensic team.

***

George sat at the Chicago cities Coroners' Desk chewing absently on a stubborn hangnail. He had examined the bodies with the coroner, who had since gone home. The files were in front of him. He mused to himself in a low mutter. "The victims were all lacerated at the throat almost severing the head. No metal fragments in the wound. Not a knife - larger and thicker - hard plastic or stainless steel - small enough to hold - never drops it - strong grip - maybe attached to the arm. Wounds always leave something behind not these - why? All of the bodies were bled - tidy - it was civil and respectful and odd, somehow. All the men had residual gunpowder on their hands - emptied their guns - didn't hit him - no guns found. No clothes, no jewelry, no money, all their teeth pulled. Souvenirs? This guy doesn't take trophies. Each man had an ID taped to his chest - made it easy for us, so we would know they were criminals - not victims - spontaneous and just executions. A no- brainer if he knew who they were - not supposed to happen - they weren't supposed to be there - caught you napping."

He got up and walked over to a steel drawer, opened it, pulled out the tray, and unzipped the bag. George's eyes moved over the body. He whispered, "…deep bruising to the backs and chests - broken bones - contusions - from being thrown around - hitting walls and furniture - and the floor. You my friend were stripped naked, washed, and wrapped in burlap - a poor man's mummy? How did he know you were crooks? He stacked you in a dumpster - fitting. Ah! He was telling me - did us a service - pick up your trash and let George know." George chuckled, "The real trash was taken out and thrown on the alley - irony - the Chicago Police did notice that mess."

A detective walked in and looked George up and down in the most condemning way. George kept quiet.

"…Heard about you Mister Fed Agent Man. You look a fucking mess. How the hell did you convince our esteemed Coroner to let you stay down here after hours? Shit, you might stumble around and fuck up a-lot-o-evidence. I'm gonna kick his ass in the morning and maybe yours while I'm at it."

George looked at him with little apparent interest and sat back down and tidied the files.

"You gonna fucking talk, or are you so fucking high on your filthy unshaven self that you don't think you have to?" The insulting Detective continued.

The Coroner walked in looking a little sheepish.

"Special Agent Silver? I forgot to tell you something I found. It's important. There was a minute amount of DNA - semen. I know what you're thinking, dying men often ejaculate, but this was in the tissue of one of the men's throat. I couldn't run any DNA analysis because it was mixed in with the victim's blood traces. I'm going home now."

George nodded and motioned the Coroner to step outside with a wink. The Coroner looked at George then at the Detective and left.

"Captain- Detective Flannigan, isn't it? Big dog around here? You are not so much a desk guy. You get out here in the street, in the dirt, and mix it up - don't you? I like that."

"I don't really give a shit what you like Raggedy man?"

I saw that movie. Do I look like Mel Gibson? My ears are too big, I think. I got a little Irish in me too, on me sainted mother's side. Sit down…please."

"I'll stand." The detective sneered.

"This is a hell of a case. I got a serial killer running around the whole country and he ends up here in Chicago. Did I tell you I was born here? Anyway, these ten guys walk in on him and 'whoa' he's apparently jacking-off. He's right there, see? And these guys walk in guns blazing and he's running around trying to fucking finish - out there dodging bullets - wanking - dodging - wanking. Quite a guy he is, I couldn't keep one with all that folderol going on.

"Bang, bang, bang, he comes - then beats the shit out of these guys - kills them - they couldn't hit him - lot 'o rubbish about these gangster types being handy with guns. Guess you gotta line 'em up first. Anyways he takes the time to clean them up, wrap dem in burlap, and leaves them for Chicago's finest. For you, I guess! The city's worst for the city's finest. One considerate and really pissed off serial killer - he whacks himself and then he whacks them - you get it?"

"What are you fucking crazy?"

The Detective was tall, maybe six-six, or seven, a full-muscled 300 lbs plus. George got out of the chair fast and swept the Detectives feet right out from underneath him. The big man hit the ground hard. George grasped hold of the man's balls before he could recover.

"Now you listen to me tuff-guy - see? And be really attentive, or I'm gonna rip your nuts off. OK? If you stand up with any attitude I don't like, I will beat you so that your four weeks of accumulated vacation will be spent in a hospital. Do you believe I can do that, Captain-Detective? Because - I don't have the time or inclination to play ape-shit dominance games with you. I am the boss monkey here and you are now my worthy sidekick, my second - got it?"

The Detective nodded still trying to find air.

"I know the names of eight of the victims. All wanted by the Bureau. The way I see it - no, that's not fair. The Bureau knows about you and your ties to these guys. The way I see it, your salary dropped better than what - half? And your gonna have to re-negotiate, because your 'protection' failed. And that has made you cranky, stupid, and very disrespectful. So, you thought you were gonna come in here, set the Fed right, find out about the killer - go get him, and turn the body, or the head, whatever is vogue now, to the people to whom you must re- negotiate. Fucking troublesome that - the Chicago's Finest Widows and Orphans Fund is not my concern. Nor do I care that you are grossly underpaid, that the assholes downtown figure in this non-existent fund when they consider pay-hikes and that you're really a nice guy responsible to a lot of hard working and brave people, as well as the safety of the good citizens of this town. I don't care about politics. I am the original Son-of-a-bitch and you want to be my friend."

George let him up. Flannigan stood and let out his breath, trying to regain some dignity.

"Sorry - I'd say you stated the case pretty well."

George pulled over the phone and dialed a number.

"GE 1113 - Yeah I'm here. Eight - that we know. I'll send in a file on the other two. I've got Flannigan here. He's scared shitless - it could get ugly - it's a mess. Have a word and don't let this boil. Handle it for me - back to status quo. I don't want to have to come back here and fix things when I'm through. Right! Good man!"

George hung up. He said nothing and either did the Detective. They sat in silence staring at each other. The phone rang. George motioned for the big man to pick it up. He did - listened and nodded and nodded again sighed, "Thanks" and hung up.

"I assume 'the' everything is back as it should be."

The big guy nodded.

"Thanks, will not be required. You have been assigned to me as my assistant and bodyguard."

"You are shitting me. I don't think you need a bodyguard."

"You underestimated me, as you were about to do with this killer. You and I are going to get a burger. And I'm going to fill you in."

"Why me? You know I'm compromised."

"Doesn't matter you work for me now. Its better money and we got full dental. You are no longer the city of Chicago's protector. These son-o bitches are on their own. Trust me they will do just fine."

George stopped and looked up at the man then smiled.

"You are the best detective in this city. And you know how to juggle what life throws at you. You are unmarried. You are ex-military. God knows how they could have missed you - pretty big target. You want this guy because he upset a delicate balance and

a lot more people would have got hurt and you were not going to have that. You're a good man, Flannigan. I need a good man for the end game. You hungry, or what?"

He nodded." You gotta show me that move. Christ I never saw it coming."

***

The Lexus was ditched in Phoenix for something bigger. He broke into a lot and acquired a Lincoln Navigator. It had tinted windows and a great sound system. And no one had to die in its acquisition. He didn't have much time; the change would happen soon and Silvers had to be ready. The snacks were gone. He placed the ice chest, with his semen, in the back seat and took off for Las Vegas. The hunger was grinding at him and the change was on him. The stress was too high. He was cutting it too close. But he knew he could do it - all will be well - all will be well.

***

The flight to Phoenix was in the dark and unpleasant to the two exhausted men. George had hired a single engine plane, with a pilot a little too proud of his racy little plane, and a bit too goosey with the controls. They finally bounced onto a small airfield outside of town. Tom Flannigan, perhaps too big for the Sporty Moody, peeled himself out of the aircraft with a satisfied and relieved grunt. They called a taxi and headed to Police Headquarters. Tom had pored through the reports, as well as the aerial antics would allow. George filled in the rest.

The Las Vegas police were respectful and helpful, Tom wondered if they had dealt with the rumbled man before.

They both looked over the now cleaned tow truck. Tom noted tiny unnoticed gouges in the metal just rear of the driver side window. George smiled.

Neither man spoke as they drove to the desert site. The black and whites marked the spot, George told Tom to pull over. The Sheriff waved them to him and introduced himself. Tom acknowledged the greeting. George did not. He strolled quickly ahead his black overcoat billowing behind him in the 90-degree heat.

"Over here!" An officer called, having caught sight of them. Tom and the Sheriff ran to catch up.

"Anyone touch anything?" George barked.

"Look Agent - whatever your name…?" The Sheriff started coming behind George, out of breath.

"Shut the fuck up! We are running out of time." He bent down and dusted off sand at his feet then moved about six feet and squatted.

"Dogs?" The Sheriff just glowered at him. "Sheriff please, be a public pain in the ass tomorrow, when I am not here. Answer the fucking question."

"Yes." The man was not pleased at being talked to in this way. His brow furrowed and his blood pressure was surly rising.

"Calm down you will have a heart attack, and we don't need any more bodies. Photographer?" George smiled.

The Sheriff called the photographer over.

"Sheriff I don't have time for normal procedures. I want Tom and you to stand on either side off me, and note everything, be brilliant for me. You are a thorough man and that's what we now need. Shutter-bug you take lots of pictures, especially when and where you're told."

George slowly dusted sand off the blanket just under the surface. He pulled out a large tweezers and lifted the blanket. The two dead officers were face down on another blanket. It was obvious that their throats were cut. He let down the top blanket carefully as the Photographer snapped away.

"Sheriff, we found the car - it's up on a mining road about a mile up." One of the officers on the scene commented, "The men say it was almost completely buried."

"Tell them to stay put. Special Agent do you need to look…?"

"No - this was an accident."

"An accident? Goddam - two of my men are dead." The Sheriff was purple and sputtering with outrage.

"Calm down big fellow - let him finish." Tom put his huge arm around the much smaller Sheriffs shoulders. The Sheriff looked at Tom's big Irish grin and recognizing the threat, he calmed instantly.

"They were not supposed to stop him - he would have taken precautions - in a hurry - the drive was boring - this is not tidy - expedient - fun - but in a hurry - he hasn't got much time."

George walked back to his car. It was clear now that an invisible thread attached both him, and the madman. He opened the door of the car and sat down still musing. The Sheriff and Tom walked over to the car, stood and stared at George in silence.

"The tow truck pissed him off. He was really angry. It took a lot of time butchering the driver - caught up with the truck - jumped up and killed him from behind - climbed in - the scratches - didn't care if we found the tow truck - pissed - no respect - the man was stealing his car - and there was something important in it."

"What is he yammering about? Is this shit real?" The Sheriff whispered.

"Learn Sheriff - Listen and learn." Tom whispered back.

"He honored those men; the policemen - quick deaths - buried them with respect - aligned to the north - faces to Hades, as the soul lifts to heaven - old ritual - ancient. He's dumped the car."

A deputy yelled to the Sheriff. "Lexus. It was called in early this morning…"

The sheriff nodded and looked back at George.

"Thanks, Sheriff, for your indulgence." Tom smiled.

"Sheriff, Agents, come here we got something." One of the forensic boys called them over.

They had uncovered most of the first body. The left arm was outstretched, the hand clasped, the index finger pointing.

"What's over there?" Tom asked.

"Nothing - desert - then Vegas. The way you came."

"That's where he's going, George. The tow truck out here wouldn't get too much attention - a cop car would have brought a lot of trouble - it was a matter of timing - for you." Tom said ominously.

"Sheriff! You run a great bunch of guys here. Please send me the reports through the LVPD." George half-grinned.

The Sheriff took the comment, and the grin, as an apology.

"I would like to sit down with you over a beer some time and start a friendship on better terms." The sheriff said.

"Tom, let's get out of here - you drive." George was still muttering to himself.

"Sheriff it ain't personal. He's an asshole and he's damn good at it."

"Just get the bastard who did this."

"Sheriff, if anyone can, he can." Tom got in the car and started it up.

***

His latest creation was a masterpiece. Silver will see his way; know his duty, and his destiny. He reached into the cooler and ate what he needed. He would bury the rest. His back hurt. He tried to masturbate earlier, but it was futile. The change was on him.

***

"What kind of guns do mobsters use?"

"You reek and don't splash any of that high-karate crap on you. It just makes it worst!"

George took out the cologne and looked at the label. It wasn't what Tom said it was. He paid a lot for it, hoping that would make some kind of difference. He splashed some on.

"Damn! OK we're getting a room. And you are going to take a shower - with soap."

"The guns Tom?"

"Open your window. I can't breathe."

George did - so did Tom.

"22 caliber clip load with a silencer - 9 loads if they can find it - favorite of the 'take a last ride variety' - usually in-house cleaning. We were always told ahead of time - no civilians. 38's - small six shot - easy to hide or throw away - defensive. 357 Mag. - chamber bored out to hold five or six - nasty - leaves big holes - a big mess - and leaves a clear message."

"Ten guys - how many bullets found?"

"No count yet. They were lodged everywhere, in the beef, ceiling, walls, floor. This guy must be able to move fast. Even with a stiff dick, why didn't he take a bullet?"

"I guess he moves real fast - like you said. Let's get something to eat."

"It will be a drive through."

"That's fine. How tall are you?"

"Six-foot eight - 320."

"It's because I'm shorter than you. I hurt your feelings and now you want to get back at me - isn't it?"

"It's because you reek and because you are shorter than me."

***

Rested, and clean, they called the LVPD. They were patched through to a unit on the site of a multiple homicide. They drove to the site. George knew it would be terrible to behold and he was right. Tom got to the top of the arroyo first and stopped, looking down at the worst thing that even he, had ever seen. He said nothing. George caught up with him. He slid down the bank and fell to his knees. It was not the worst thing he had ever seen, but it was close.

Three women were buried up to the bottom of their breasts. All three had silicone implants - a blond, a red head and a brunette, all in a line. The middle body was facing straight ahead. The others were turned slightly to the right and left. All were wearing sunglasses. George got up and walked to the front of the corpses. He called Tom over for a look. He blew out a huff. Took out big forceps, from his coat pocket, and removed one of the jeweled eyeglasses, carefully placing it in an evidence bag that an officer held open. He then backed off. The eyeballs had been removed. Each victim's left hand pointed to a large stone in front of her. A small trench was dug in front of the stone and it appeared as if water had been poured into the depression. The whole nine-foot length was still muddy. Tom sat back on a boulder and took in the scene. The forensic guys came over the lip of the arroyo. Tom waved them off.

"Give us a few!"

"Talk out loud - whatever you're thinking Tom. I 'm sticking here - I'm starting to take it personal." George was sitting in the dirt staring at the bodies.

"This is a painting - three girls, three strippers, three sisters. The position means something - color of the hair - the rock - muddy - muddy waters - river - Colorado River. Officer?" He pointed to the closest man. "Is there a formation along the Colorado, close by, that is red, yellow and brown."

George continued where Tom left off.

"Not close by - the breasts - artificial - silicon - silica - sand - maybe mining - mineral mining - you're right it's the Colorado - high cliffs - the place is out in the open yet hidden - we'll see it at dusk. He needs time - won't find anything much of these

women under the sand - I believe he ate their uteri - he needed a certain kind of meat. There won't be any more planned killing. As long as no one's got in his way."

The closest Officer wretched.

"Officer, when you gather yourself get on the horn, and find me a Sheriff, or a Park Ranger, that flies' helicopters over - and knows the Grand Canyon." Tom barked and waved.

George stood and dusted himself off. He took off his coat. Tom was worried.

"Call Petres…" George threw Tom his cell phone. "... She's in Phoenix; tell her to have a full Tactical Team meet me. Officer, is there a Ranger Station in the Grand Canyon?"

"Yes sir. I don't know who's on."

"Find out. Tom, throw the officer my phone when you're done. You and I are in a hurry."

George climbed out of the gully.

Back in the car, George drove and Tom looked over a map.

"I'm hungry and I'm thirsty." Tom whined.

"Me too. We'll stop at the first place we find. That didn't take you off your feed?"

"It's upsetting, but if I'm not hydrated and fed, I'll not be strong enough for this monster, because you don't plan to take him in. You and I are going to kill him. Aren't we?"

"Do you know I haven't had a good cup of coffee in two days?"

"Yeah, Me either - a good Kona, or Kenyan, sweet with crème."

George looked over at Tom who didn't flinch.

"With a great fucking huge juicy cheeseburger."

"You are fucking brilliant."

Tom just looked out the window. "What the fuck is this guy?"

***

He waited. George would come. He was in enormous pain, but it would be worth it. He had finished the ritual, as he remembered it. He hoped it was right. "Come to me George…Come to me. It's time for you to be enlightened - time for the change. The killing hasn't stopped …it's just started. Give me time… George, give me time."

***

The helicopter was waiting on the pad. The pilot was from the Sheriff's Department out of Flagstaff. He waved them over, "Are you Special Agent Silver?

George nodded, while Tom introduced himself to the Deputy. A larger helicopter roared overhead and George pointed to the craft while yelling at the Deputy.

"That’s my people Deputy. They will stay on the ground till we give the order."

The large helicopter landed with a roar and ten heavily armed, helmeted, and armored personnel jumped out. Tom walked over asking who was in charge. A smallish, helmeted fellow raised a hand, while pulling off ‘her’ helmet. Special Agent Petre was briefed and barked orders to her men above the din.

"A woman?" Tom asked George when he got close. "You think I’m tough? She’ll kick your ass. Beats me up all the time.’

"Really? Tom turned a little paler."

"Let's go…Deputy when you are ready."

The three men climbed into the helicopter, strapped in, and put on their headsets.

"I can think of four sites that may fit the description Tom gave me. It’s going to take a while; the canyon is a big place. Indians, Explorers, Historians and Locals have given three areas the name Three Sisters. The colors mean nothing to me."

"That has something to do with late afternoon light." Tom offered. "Coffee George?"

George looked at Tom with an odd eye. Tom just smiled and poured from a thermos.

George took the cup looked in it, tasted it and smiled.

"You're welcome George. It’s Guatemalan, your favorite. I don’t like it as much as other roasts. I got the Precinct to go with a good Colombian."

"Is there a hostage?" The pilot asked.

"Me!" George said while looking out the window.

"The guy wants George. George wins, no one else dies. If the bastard wins then the killing goes on and, I guess, Special Agent Silvers has bequest me the honor of succeeding him."

"Shit …how bad is this guy?"

"…Bad, or good, don’t apply to Monsters.” George looked out on the stunning landscape. “There! To the right …see the cuts brown, red and yellow?"

The pilot banked and came around. The late day sun, just as depicted in the macabre murder scene in the desert, showed the three colors on three distinct vertical faces. The river raged here, crashing and throwing spray high into the air. In the center of the ‘sisters’ was a large rock jutting out into the river.

"Find a place to land pilot. Tom, call in Petre. This is it."

"This is not one of the locations." The pilot hovered roughly, looking for a place to set down. "I don’t see a place to set down; I’ve got a lot of draft. The canyons pretty narrow."

"Look… Deputy! There’s a good-sized sand bar downstream about a quarter mile. Set us down there." Tom reached into his holster and checked his pistol.

"Damn!" The pilot reacted to the modified 357 he had pulled from his holster.

"Some guns leave a message, Deputy!"

"Yes sir!"

The pilot swung the craft around, quickly found the sand bar, and landed. George and Tom climbed out, waved the pilot off, and waited for the Assault Team.

"I appreciated the coffee!" George slapped Tom on his big back. Tom flinched in spite of the friendly nature of the gesture.

"What is this thing?" Tom asked as they both sat in a shaded area up against the cliff face. George didn't respond.

"No footprints in or out - bloody mess - sandy gully - this guy's a genius or he's a fucking freak."

"Maybe both. I've been doing this 23 year and this I have never seen. Except in dreams. I sometimes drink coffee at night then take a cold pill to agitate my brain… then this bastard, or someone like him shows up in my dreams."

"Damn George… who wins?"

"I don't know. I always wake up. Let's go…we got a hike. We don't really know if this is the place. He could be fucking with us, or we just plain missed."

Both men hauled themselves upright and headed upriver.

***

He sensed Silver was close and he was pleased. The change had started and he was very tired. But he knew he had enough left for Special Agent George Silver, and his new apprentice. He loved the Irish, all his people had. He thought that there might be a little Irish in him.

***

Tom and George reached the rock and began looking for anything that would give them a clue to the killer's whereabouts. The troop 'copter came in overhead and the team dropped down on ropes. George told them to fan out and look for anything out of the ordinary.

It was Tom who yelled first. A small cave opening was at the back of a side canyon. The canyon itself was narrow, no more than six feet wide.

George called over to Petre to call in to the ranger station to see if there had been any purpose flooding recently. She checked and yelled back, "They did two months ago - for ecological reasons."

"Why is that important…George? Why is that important? Tom insisted.

"This cave opening was uncovered by the river. Tom, get a big gun from the team and wait here for me."

"Bullshit! You're not going in alone. You got to have backup."

"No - he wants me. I'm here and you know how fast he is. If anyone goes in with me, they die. I think there may be some talking involved - give me that cannon of yours. You and Petre stay close and hide. He'll have to come out, one way or the other."

Tom handed George his gun, reluctantly. "You know I have an idea about this guy, don't you?"

"Yes, but that idea doesn't help us. A lot of people died so this fucker could get my attention. There's an ethic to it; one I don't understand and I want to find out what it is."

"He's going to kill you."

"We'll see."

Agent Petre strode over to the two men. "Did I just hear you say that you were going in alone?"

"Look - we don't know what 's in there. It may be a wild goose chase. I'll go in and call out to you. Petre, fan you're men out behind cover." George asked Petre for a flashlight from her vest. She handed it to him.

"This is against protocol - your rules boss."

George was already in the opening. "I wrote them - so I can change them." He yelled back.

He turned on the flashlight and crept along a long tunnel no more than three feet wide at any point. He couldn't help visualizing, in trepidation, the tons of earth above him. A small explosive would end Special Agent Silvers chase for good. He forced himself to relax by deepening his breath; it made no difference. He started to panic again. "Why am I attributing sanity to this situation?" he thought, just as he tumbled out of the tunnel, down a fairly steep incline and crashing into a rock. He stood and dusted himself off in the low light provided by the flashlight. He suddenly, ironically, and insanely, cared about the way he looked.

"Don't worry about your visage Silver. I would have indicated formal attire if the ceremony called for it." The voice was low-pitched and had a sinister lisp to it. The lower harmonics vibrated his testicles. George began to think that none of this was a good idea.

"Nonsense George, this is a wonderful idea." The voiced came from a different direction.

George jumped for the flashlight and managed to pull out the pistol at the same time.

"Now, Special Agent? Yes, I can hear your thoughts, but only if I'm close."

George ran the flashlight around. He was in an immense cavern. Large stony columns supported the ceiling. The whole had about it a manmade quality.

"No George - not Pueblo - not Anasazi. Much - much older." The voice came from another direction causing George to spin and search the dark.

"Normally, I wouldn't let anyone this close to me and live. But this is a special day indeed. I have wanted to meet you for some time. Of that, we'll talk in a minute. Your friends are getting anxious, and we will need some time."

George was knocked over, face down; by a huge blast of wind, as he hit the floor a cascade of dirt hit his back. He struggled to his feet choking the dirt out of his mouth.

"Sorry, I'm back. I didn't mean to be so dramatic. Are you all right?" the voice seemed too near.

"My people?" George worried.

"Tom and Petre, I rendered unconscious - the rest, I sadly had to kill. We don't need fireworks George."

"Jesus!"

"I hope He's caring for them right now. Religion is another day's conversation - should we have that day. But, for now, let's get down to our business. You have deduced that I'm not human. That early deception of mine was necessary. It is against my ethics to deceive. So, you can see I am not the devil, or a demon. It was just old fashion duplicity. If I had exposed myself too soon, tradition would have required a fair contest."

"I don't understand any of this." George sank to the ground. "Just kill me."

"George, I'm about to be a mother. I need you to help me with our young."

All of George's training fell away. He collapsed in terrible remorse. So many died and he has not done his job. He had suspicions, but he didn't trust the impossible-couldn't wrap his head around it. Even if his dreams demanded it, he stayed in what he knew - and that was his failing. This was more than he had ever encountered. Tears fell and splattered on the floor. His arrogance had destroyed him. Here was a being so different than any human that had come before, and he had helped create it. God help him. His belief in himself and need for making the wrong right was shattered.

"Oh nooooo!" The voice sounded as sorrowful has George felt. "I am not human; you have no reason to feel such failure. I am so sorry. It is our children of whom I care - your kind and mine. Believe me George that love and concern is who I am. Sleep awhile and I will finish my transformation; then all will make sense once again."

George felt his eyes close and he laid his head upon his arm and slept.

When he awoke, he felt at peace, he had a dream that he flew over green hills and vales. He dreamt of a different time, a slower time. Then he realized where he was and the danger, he was in.

"You are in no danger, Dear George." The voice was different, still low, but feminine somehow. "Good …you hear my voice in your mind. I am, now, unable to speak aloud. I have become, but I am still young."

George arose and looked around; there was a golden glow to everything in the cavern.

"Listen well, my George. We are family you and I. But not like you're human families - much more intimate. We have souls both of us - this flawed civilization of

yours has dimmed your ability to know yours, other than as a concept. History is in the memory of your ancestors, not false scribblings written by and aggrandizing the victors of war and mayhem. The serial killers you hunt have high jacked your humanity. You have made them Kings and allowed their corrupted souls to steal your birthrights. My people have ours with us; therefore, we remember down long corridors of time. I started as a male, born just a few months ago. I was the only one of my people. At first, I was desolate - like you. Then I felt you. The George lived in this time, God was again reigning in heaven and I knew I had to find a way to have my people live again. So, I dug out. I fed on the live things that were in this canyon, till I gained strength. When I was strong enough, I started on my duty to task you. You see… when the George is tasked, he thinks the thoughts that have me grow and you become who you are born to be. It is how it has always been; until the star rock fell and lay ruin the Earth. I was overjoyed that the link still existed and all would be well once more. I have seen the ruin of this world, and now am about to see it reborn."

"You're speaking in riddles and I don't get it!" George screamed.

"Oh dear. Why are you so angry? This is a joyful moment. I told you we start as males. Each male, one at a time, must task the George, a George - one of your people - to earn the right to mate with a female. It is our highest honor to die on the lance of The George. Indeed, the longer contest - the game - the higher the honor. You see we, my kind, all share memories, no battle is ever forgotten. We sing the tales to the very stars. It is like you're…Super Bowl." The laughter sounded odd in George's head. "The male who escapes you breeds and dies to feed the female, while she waits in her nest inside a mountain. Do you understand?"

"I'm hearing you." George stared at the point in the cavern that was the brightest.

"There were no females - there is the rub. You humans have become cleverer in our long sleep. There was a time when we lived in a balanced world, your people and mine, then the stone from the sky, a fiery stone that carried a very tiny life form in its center. I am the only survivor of my species. Most of your people died, but fought back and thrived with deadened brains, from the trauma. God, look at the mess you have made of the world. Thank God that I used your human cleverness to find a way to impregnate myself and invoke the change. It felt kind of perverse. I lived through it and it worked. I am pregnant."

"OK show yourself. This is too weird and all I want to do is put a bullet in your insane fucking head." George started walking toward the glow. "I hear you just fine… telepathy…fuck you!"

"You use that word in a negative way. So, without us, you bear so many children that the act of creation is now used as a curse. Fine then… look upon me"

Out of the glow came a terrible scream and an enormous form arose, winged and monstrous, till it was full above George filling the cavern. A long neck towered over him. A great fiery majesty, wings forty feet from tip to tip, golden scales covered the great body - a Dragon. George fell back in fear. He looked at his gun and threw it away as a peace offering. He couldn't make a sound.

"Calm your fear, I will not hurt you. I'm going to give you back your soul, please relax. It will overwhelm you - breath threw it."

George could not feel his body, then like a dream descending over him he could see all the days of his family, from his own memories, to those in the distant past, beyond the time of the Romans, and back to the great death. Then there he saw, back when the world was a garden - when the Drakon females flew in the skies above us. He was a Geu Orge. He sought males, the Murdia er. He sought them and slew them, as was the ancient agreement. The immature male Drakon slew and devoured the people, till they were found and killed. People bonded against their selfish nature and made cities, found a way to get along for their mutual defense; tasking further the males, and making the game even better. Thus, allowing for a balance between the two peoples of the Earth. The Drakon revealed to the people water sources and fertile valleys. The fires started by the Drakon provided nesting areas, thinning jungle and forests, allowing for leas and grazing areas, keeping the earth healthy and thriving. It worked well. George came out of the vision knowing it to be true. The male that had been baiting George, smelled his genes, and had come looking for him to lead him to this meeting. The killing was what they did, he and the Drakon. The Geu Orge would devour the males they slew, or he would be devoured. The genes of each race infused into each other, combining through ingestion. It was a sacred bond of deep honor and tradition. The blood of Dragons flowed in human veins and the blood of humans was in Dragons. This last male Drakon took a huge risk for his kind. If he had died at the Agent's hand their race would be finally extinct. George looked up at the Drakon with no idea what to do or say.

"George, or should I call you Saint George - at least they remembered the importance of your vocation. Don't look for me …you won't find me. It will be generations before the Drakon will again be full in the skies. But I have made scores of males and a half-dozen female in me. The males I will hatch in six regions of the Earth; one, in each three years, to start. The change will be slow, but it will come. Both our peoples will save this hurt Earth. We will build slowly. Get your Guild up and running. Train them and give them the long memory. You now possess what you call magic - it's so much more than that, the Earth will speak to you her needs. Give your people back their souls. You now have that ability. While you are at it, take special care to give souls back to the egocentric nitwits you elect to run things for you. Rid yourself of the monsters. Farewell, Saint George."

George fell asleep in an instant. When he awoke, he climbed out of the, now much wider, tunnel opening. Tom and Lois Petre were just coming awake. Both looked at George and both said …

"You have got to be kidding…was that a dream? What the fuck just happened?"

All looked sadly at the bodies around them. A lot more will die, but if the vision was true the world will be a better place. There will the seeking and slaying of the famished, and brutally cunning, Murdia er and one day there will be golden Drakon soaring through the sky. And soon, there will be a covenant between both peoples. George did not share with his partners the total vision given to him in the Drakon made cave. If any attempt to find and kill this female monster should be undertaken, a truer horror would be visited on the human race. She will grow, in a short term, to be larger,

and will fly faster, than a 747. She will blow fire capable of melting whole cities. She will virtually be indestructible. A deal is a deal.

"Come on …we have a lot of work to do. We'll need funding."

George started walking upstream. "I have some souls to pass out."

"The Vatican." Tom suggested.

Both of his companions stopped to look at him. George turned around and scowled.

"What? You give the pope and a couple of cardinals the Long Vision …we get an Order, and we're in business. Saint George and the Order of …what…Irish Saints?" Tom offered.

"Shut the…heck up."

"His mouth seems to be cleaned up. Do you think that we can get him to shave more than once a week?" Petre grinned at Tom.

Tom looked at Petres red hair.

"On me mother's side."

Tom nodded. "I don't know. He might look good in a beard."

"He can't go in front of the Pope smelling like Brut." Petre wrinkled her nose.

"We'll work on it."

"Are you two through?" George glowered at them both.

"Yes Sir!"

"Yes Sir!"

"Call in the 'copter to meet us at that sand bar. While we are walking, we'll make up a good story about terrorists…or something."

"And when the Drakon start to fly?" Petre asked, no longer smiling.

"Then we better be in business. I'm gonna need another overcoat."

"Another overcoat?" Tom questioned "It's gotta be 95 degrees out here."

"It's part of my look."

"You need a new look." Petre looked serious.

"Armor." Tom offered.

"And a horse, and lance." Petre smirked.

"I paid a lot of money for that cologne." George barked.

End

Building

I once knew
an astral architect
she built smoke rings
out of burning
sentient leaves
then whispered
secret words
through them
into one of my ears
out the other

She
found word forms
that twisted thought
transformed meaning
changing and re-naming
while she
danced on silvered clouds
pulling me along
with a tether
made of expectations
asking me
to sing harmony
casting smoky spells
for the future
foundations
built on intentions

She
told me
stone secrets
I can never remember
what she said
she faded
but left her constructs behind

One can spend a great deal of your life never realizing who you are. Accidental events and unfortunate circumstances can leave a person frozen, unable to decide. A story is created where you are a victim and you live it as the unhappy protagonist. The problem with writing that story is that the author has to narrow a view. Possibilities will creep in and choices must be made. How will the writer respond?

IN MRS. ARCHER'S SERVICE

Shirley Spearson stood outside the house with some relief. The neighborhood at first frightened her. It was a marginal area that the city was trying its bureaucratic best to modernize, by making it a Development Zone. The mixed bag of seedy business fronts, low-end hotels, and old homes, in various levels of repair, gave it an eclectic charm.

There were still the slipshod multicolored hippie-houses spotted here and about. She could imagine what the area was like in the sixties. The communes, crashing and exploring relationships, loud drums and guitar music, Slick singing of rabbits, Ferlingetti rambling, and 'Something's happening here', the herbal smell of burning pot smoke wafting in the air, and street parties. Everywhere Harlequin-dressed, longhaired, freaky-people, just trippin' on a groovy day, a brief and different time, a time before the real world crushed the mood and illusion of peace, a time before hers.

The whole street had a look of age, of stories told and forgotten. Actions recorded and filed away somewhere in hidden places, just like the people who once lived here. For her people were often filed away and forgotten, even when they still live. But here, there was a valiant attempt to bring the neighborhood back to life. Across the street was a Lawyer's office, remodeled from an old Victorian, painted with far too many shades of green, gild and a pompous flash, clearly more elegant than was the original. Her future employer's house was, however, just as Shirley would have imagined, an old turn of the century house. It too was elegant but in a refined way. There was subtlety here, pride without being obsessive or ostentatious. The small lawn and flowerbed, alongside the walkway, was fenced with a small white picket. The house was maintained and painted in subdued tones. It was born here, long ago, and in spite of the troublesome eclectic quality of the neighborhood, the house was somehow at peace. Shirley shook her head at the whimsical turn of fantasy on which she found her mind. She had taken the trolley and had to walk up from C Street to First and Front. She was hot, uncomfortable and a bit frightened. Neighborhoods like this in Cleveland were not to be tread alone by single

women, day or night. Shirley knew herself to be attractive, but decent, and thirty-five is certainly not old. Her thoughts moved from the house to the trickle of assuredly unpleasant sweat, at that moment, dripping down from her armpit. She had walked past a magnificent Catholic Church and it surprised her that it would be here. San Diego was such a bright and shiny jewel, why would it need such a church? Everyone here must live in the gentle here-and-now, rejecting such religious superstitions that she could not. Another sweat bead fell in her eye. The salt stung her and forced out a prayer asking God to forgive her. The newer contrary religions were Lucifer's lure and she dared not bite. She looked around and wondered if there was accosting rouge around. 'Maybe she could meet him and…' She reddened at the stupidity of the thought. Her long dry spell without affection was her own doing and the thought that a violent monster could be tamed, to be obedient to her whims, was crazy. The last one certainly wasn't. Her mind went blank of the unpleasant thought and she whispered the Act of Contrition

Front Street was high on a hill. She could hear the freeway to her left. When she turned around, she could just see the bay sparkling with thousands of dancing diamonds. Sailboats dotted the glistening water. It was a painting; a modern one, painted with acrylic hope and bold primary colors of promise and redemption. She made a mental note to go to confession Saturday. Maybe have a chat with one of the, surely forward thinking, priests who reside in this fine city. She looked forward to a theology for the living. In her mind she tried to imagine the sea being just down from her. She could feel that older sea rich with the smell of fresh caught fish and could hear the rough talk of long dead sailors. She knew that the land had been taken from the sea and the whole of the high- rised downtown sat on that man handled dredged and artificial earth. It bothered her that she knew and she didn't know why. She turned to walk up the inviting sidewalk and stopped short. The air had gotten cold and damp. A fog had enclosed her. She heard footsteps behind her. The turned and the sound stopped. The fog cleared and a tall, dark shadowy man stood just feet from her. He was staring at her in a rude and aggressive way. Shirley stared at him, in an uncharacteristically brave fashion, she asked him his business. He answered but it was a low rumble of barely heard syllables. He turned and walked down the street. The fog would break in sections and she was astonished to see what she had just imagined. There was the port at the foot of Front Street. She could hear the fishermen's rough talk and see the great sailing ships anchored in the water. Then in an instant it was gone and the warm sun beat down on her fair skin. She shaded her eyes as if that would help to return the impossibly romantic vision she just had. She clucked and cursed herself as an easily suggestive fool. Weak mindedness is not what she needed now. She prayed to Jesus above to grant her wisdom and strength. She added that if the Lord Father wasn't too busy with people of real importance, could He keep an eye on her. She gathered herself, a study in determination and poise, and walked to the door and rang the bell with a will born of faith.

The door opened the minute the bell rang and standing there was a stunningly handsome black woman of forty- something. She was dressed in a shift of silk ablaze with tropical florals of blaring color. She wore an absurdly different style of apron, checker-board black and white that made the eyes swim. In her hands or more accurately on her hand was a large chicken hopefully about to be roasted or fried.

"What are you doing standing there girl? I got a chicken to jerk. Come in out of da heat. Been like it all week." The women grasped Shirley's arm and pulled her into the elegant wood and brass rich foyer." Not supposed to be hot like that here. 'Tis the Mother Earth crying out for her children to take better care or 'tis the El Nino. Don't really know past my foolish ideas." She threw her head back and laughed unabashedly. Impossibly large white teeth filled her smile and her eyes were buried in wrinkles of mirth.

The woman looked Shirley up and down in a way that had her feel uncomfortable. In a few brief moments she had been handled, without so much as an introduction, been forced to listen to the ravings of an idolater, and looked over, in such a manner, as to decry common decency.

"You are a waif…do you not eat girl?"

Shirley dropped her suitcases with obvious ire.

"I would ask you…" The scolding words barely left her lips.

"Come into my kitchen. Oreena will feed you something to soothe that puritan stiffness out of your back and put you in a gentler mood. No doubt the trip out has rattled your manner and made you unfriendly. In this house we are always in the finest of humor and why not? We live in a beautiful city and the sun most always shines. Oreena is the best Cook in the world and a genius with the sweets. Looking at you I'll bet you haven't touched a sweet in a long while. Come!"

Oreena grabbed her again and ran her into the kitchen, sat her on a chair and shoved her up to the small table next to a ten -pane window overlooking the backyard. A beautiful vegetable garden and flowers prospered everywhere covering the whole of the garden fence to fence. Oreena opened the refrigerator door jarring Shirley away from her concentrated admiration. Oreena produced a custard and fruit tart and sat it down in front of Shirley. The older woman looked down on her, with a look that told Shirley that there was to be no refusal. The tart was nothing less than art and the delicacy in the matter of its form, and the delicious color of the fruit, was dazzling. She looked up at the woman and forgave her untoward manner. If this treat tasted anything like it looked, it was a sin, and the woman was the genius that she professed to be.

"Eat it with your fingers. Here!" Oreena went to the sink, wet and lightly soaped a towel. She turned and handed it to Shirley. She wiped her hands without ever taking her eyes from Oreena's face.

"Eat it now my girl - ‘tis pretty, it's made for the eyes sure, but the tongue will dance with it."

Shirley did not eat desserts, she feared obesity, but there was no resisting. The minute the tart hit her tongue she gasped; never had she tasted anything so wonderful. Each bite was better than the one before. The palate did not tire; instead, each new mouthful was a new sensation. She was lost in the flavors and suddenly found herself on a beach somewhere far from the kitchen table.

The breeze was a gentle warm caressing her lush, tanned body. She stood and stripped out of her tank top and shorts and ran into the clear blue water. The feeling of her breasts bouncing was a sensation she had never known, to her it was wanton and

curiously pleasant. She waded out in the cool water up to her thigh tops and looked at the too-blue sky through her sunglasses. Her hands roved over her breasts and belly in a display of reckless abandon. She moved her hand down to her artistically pubic hair, rubbing absently. A most wicked thought ran through her mind as she touched her most private self. A delightful shock ran through her. 'If only there was a man.' She heard a whistle from the beach and there he was, tanned, well-muscled and beautiful. She giggled and began to display all her charms to the stranger. She splashed, wiggled, bent and threw her hair this way and that, all to lure him in the water. He bit and was hooked. The Adonis dropped his own shorts and came through the water like a plow. He came up to her, looking her over and breathing heavily. He reached around her and put both his hands gently on her naked bottom, lifting the cheeks, just enough, so the pull would have her be aware of her womanhood. He kissed her.

Shirley jumped and was staring at Oreena who laughed and turned back to her cooking.

"You like my cooking. Your room is upstairs the first door to the right. Go freshen up, shower…you have time before dinner. You'll meet Mrs. Archer at dinner. We all eat together."

Shirley wondered on the state of her mind.

"It was a dream, my girls…go freshen up…Go!"

Shirley stood and straightened herself." Was there a hallucinogenic in that tart?"

"Shut up…" Oreena laughed." My cooking is perfect. If you should see something it is because it's in you to have such a vision. Don't blame me my girl. Get your shameful self-cleaned up."

Shirley stared red faced at the woman. There was no way she could know what Shirley saw and felt unless she was a witch. She dropped her head, crossed herself and prayed for protection.

"You silly thing …why would you need protection from me. I'm only the cook. Pray that you handle the affairs of this house as well as you handled that one on the beach." Oreena giggled." And when you get around to finishing that little daydream tell Oreena all about it! Now, girl, enough of this dallying. I mean it! Go, get you put away and tidy. Dinner is in a half- an- hour."

She did as she was told. Her suitcases were where she had dropped them. She looked back on the kitchen and wondered what she had gotten herself into.

The shower was just the thing. Shirley walked from the opulent bathroom and into her bedroom. It was really more than that. It had an alcove for a large four-poster bed with lace tenting. In the corner of the space was a lovely marble-topped table with a Tiffany lamp. Next to the table was a hunter green velvet upholstered recliner. On the opposite wall was a tall, magnificent set of drawers with masterfully carved floral details on each drawer face. The main sitting area had an office set up by the window, looking down Front Street. The desk was dark oak and, though made to appear old, was configured for a computer tower, screen, keyboard, printer, fax, copier, and disc and hard-copy file storage. The rest of the room was a living room, as Shirley understood that

term. There were two overstuffed chairs, a sofa, coffee table, and side tables with elegant lamps. The walls were painted in the French style, the walls were a lovely shade of green and the trim and doors, baseboards and crown mold were in a bright white. The paintings on the wall were all from good impressionist artists, which was Shirley's favorite painting style. Even a beautiful one that resembled the vision she had experienced outside. Whatever she thought when she was downstairs was fading in the ease and comfort of her new surroundings. She even noticed that there were water jets in the tub; she would remember to ask Oreena how to use the system. Laughter rolled out of her as she covered her mouth. Oreena would no doubt have a use other than cleanliness. Walking over to the desk, still laughing, she jotted down a note to make sure she stopped by the church this Saturday. That poor Priest may be seeing a lot of little Miss Spearson. She didn't even bother to unpack. When she checked the closets, the racks were full of expensive and well-made dresses and blouses, in the finest fabric. The set of drawers was full of exquisitely shameful silk and lace under-things, of a skimpiness that made her blush. There was a knock on the door and Oreena called to her that dinner would be served in five minutes.

Shirley stood in the all-together and fretted.

"The clothes are all yours and they will fit your skinny frame perfectly. Put your suitcases out on the front porch before we retire tonight. They will go out in the trash. Ain't nothing in them, girl that I will let you wear in front of the Lady. For now, slip on a shirt-dress over nothing and get down here before what I took so long to make ends up cold and me in a horrid mood." The voice through the door diminished.

Shirley ran to the closet and picked out a dress and slipped it on. The nakedness beneath the dress made her too aware and she had to make a good impression on her new employer. She decided to wear panties just for propriety's sake. Then she ran downstairs into the kitchen still brushing her hair.

"Better! We eat in the dining room. Don't brush your hair in my kitchen." Oreena slapped Shirley's butt." Come!" Oreena pointed to a door.

Shirley ignored the familiarity and opened the door to a beautiful formal dining room. The cherry wood table was set in fine china and crystal. Shinning silver lids covered serving dishes but allowed mouthwatering aromas to escape into the chandeliered formal dining room. Mrs. Archer was of an age where it was hard to determine her years. Her beauty had not faded just altered appropriately to a regular and more dignified mien. She was sitting in a wheelchair looking at Shirley with obvious intent.

"Come my girl and sit over here next to me."

Shirley walked over with weighted shyness.

"Sweetheart I won't bite…hard." The old women smiled endearingly.

"Oreena will come in espousing her culinary genius in a moment. In the meantime, my dear, let us get a bit aquatinted. Sit, please, here to my left."

Shirley liked her instantly. Whatever infirmity the woman suffered did not change a cheerful and engaging deportment. Shirley sat in the fully upholstered chair, arranging herself, knowing she was not properly dressed for such an occasion.

"You know of course that I knew your previous employer and she raved about you. It is how you come to my house. I was distressed to find out she had decided to go into a care facility. Is she lucid?"

Shirley dropped her eyes in reverence for her former employer, Ms. Jennings.

"She made the decision before her mind went completely. She is now unaware of her surroundings and rambles on about another life, much different from her own. It was upsetting." Shirley's eyes teared just slightly.

"Please don't be upset. I understand you settled her affairs with the respect and gratitude of her family. Good for you! I have read that the effects of Dementia can cause a person to dream up another life. It is not uncommon. I thank the dear Lord that I don't suffer such a dreadful ailment. But after all Ruth is one hundred and two, perhaps the mind tires of a life that will not be as we wish, and toward the end of one's days, the mind decides it has had enough. Another life, internally longed for, can be created, as a gift from the Creator. I find that comforting. Don't you?"

"I never gave it thought. I fear I still may be grieving." Shirley felt a need to spout the edicts of her faith but held back.

Oreena burst through the pass-way door with a grand flourish.

"Here it is another masterpiece. Am I not wonderful? Wait till you taste this. We will start with a butter leaf salad with mango- coconut- raisin relish, with sweet and sour vinaigrette dressing. Then a fried breaded banana, sitting golden, in an orange rum sauce. The entree is Jerk Chicken, my Momma's recipe." She winked at Mrs. Archer. "… Black bean and rice, and a Mango sorbet. For dessert, an Apricot yogurt cake with an Orange honey sauce and a sweet crème, and French roast coffee, served in individual presses."

The beautiful salad was laid down in front of Shirley. It was a delight to the eye. It looked as if each leaf had been laid down with intention and not a soupcon of relish had fallen to the sides. Oreena sat down and looked at Shirley with some impatience.

It was Mrs. Archer who spoke, "We are all good Catholics here, though I dare say we have differing views on the doctrines of our own faith. Please, my Dear, will you say grace."

There is not one thing that would have made Shirley more at home than that simple and inclusive request. She nodded and thanked the Lord for the bounty that will be put on their table by His grace and the ingenious preparations of Ms. Oreena. Before Shirley could say, ' In Jesus' name. Amen', Oreena added "Lord please tell this delightful girl that Mizz was my Momma's name not mine. In Jesus we give thanks. Amen. Now let's get to this."

The meal was the best Shirley had ever eaten. She was a little ashamed of herself as the last bit of sweetness passed over her tongue. The panic set in and she shifted trying to think of a reason to leave the table so she could purge. When she looked up, she was ashamed of the stern look both women gave her.

"That is something you will not be allowed to do." Mrs. Archer scolded her as if she was a child.

"Shirley girl, what I cook is in perfect balance. We do not snack, so we will not become fat. As for you, I will put twenty pounds on that anemic frame of yours in three months. We will take care of your wardrobe as you flesh out."

Shirley covered her mouth, shaking at the impossibly exposed shame and held back a scream of terror. The room went black then lightened from white to a beautiful sunny day.

She was standing on a hill overlooking a long green and purple flowered valley. The hunger in her was loud and demanding. The women had done what they could to keep the young ones from starvation and illness. Herb broth and cold-dried roots could not sustain them after such a long hard winter. The stores in the caves would not have lasted another waning moon. They had lost nearly half the babies to hunger and fever in this first warming moon, and the sorrow of it had not one eager for what must be done. Keeping the will to live was difficult. The men were weak but needed a successful hunt. She covered her eyes with her hands, looking for the hunters. She had heard the calling horn just after sunup and it had lifted everyone's spirit. The sun was now full overhead and she still could not see them. She prayed to the Goddess that the hunt went well. They all needed meat to gain enough strength to move south to the Great River Valley. She heard the horn again. It was blown by her man, the wisest of all the males. There was joy and a promise in its rapid calls.

The men would think that some storm god, fire god, or a beast that combined all the animals they knew, gave them their strength to find game and allow a kill. Women knew what men hungered for, besides the constant irritation for their need to bury their hard one in a woman's nest; they needed to know their god as if it were a companion. Women understood the separation, love, anger, caring, cruelty, depth and far reaching of the Goddess, but were forbidden to tell. It is a truth sung by women, when we all gather and camp together, during our moon cycle to allow our blood flow to return to the earth.

She smiled at the stories she was told as a child. The first man and woman, her grandmother said, lived in a valley where all was good and no one suffered. The Forever Mother told the woman, that while the man hunts, she was to gather the healing foods that grow. One such holy plant was forbidden, but the woman dug up its roots to heal a dreadful wound her man had received while on a hunt. The woman in her fear and anger felt that the Mother Goddess had betrayed her, for would she not die if her man died? Was it not the Mother Goddess that made man and woman to be as one? The man's wound did heal, but they were ordered out of the sacred valley, into a hard and cruel world. Woman knew then the pain of childbirth, the unreasoned anger of men, and the grief of death. But the women, in their lunar blood flow, gave back to the Earth, and in that time did ease the anger of the Goddess. The men suffered the woman's transgression as well. The poor things searched and fretted over meaning in the silliest of things, it made them mad. It was the will of the Goddess that women knew and men searched. Men must search in their souls and in the world. They must seek meat and never be content. Women needed care during the times when their children grew. It was the way of things. We all cleave to one another and survive as best we are able.

A small boy pulled at her she looked down and smiled. Here was one who would know something of the ways of women. A few of these were born and she knew he would grow to be a Holy Man. There was both woman and man in him. The Old Woman, another liken to her son, had seen it. Four seasons of want, and he was still strong. He sang the birds songs and made a peaceful lilt when they all tried to sleep. Her son spent much time with the Old Woman. The women knew that the Old Woman had a weary and weakening body and was slowly passing knowledge into the soul of the boy. The men feared him already, but they would let him live and grow. It was said that men like these took no woman, knew the will of the gods, and could see the animals at a great distance. It was magic that men did not understand but accepted without complaint. They would dance before great fires and thank their made-up gods for the gift of such a man. And he, so small now, would sit on a large rock, over that same fire, and laugh in his heart. He would sing to the Goddess and the Father in a tongue no one could understand and the tribe would grow and prosper above all others.

She saw the men, they were carrying poles and fur and hide slings, full of meat. She looked down at her son thanking him for his gentle magic. The boy pointed to the valley below and called his father's name. His little face alit with glee. She knew he couldn't see, at least with his tiny eyes, but his soul was already much bigger than his body.

"Sugar?" Oreena asked.

Shirley awoke from her daydream, to feel Oreena over her. She turned to see the coffee press in the woman's hand and the sugar bowl, with cubed sugar.

"Please! Two!" Oreena set down the pot, smiled and tonged two cubes in Shirley’s cup.

"Are you feeling better?" Mrs. Archer sipped her coffee peering over her cup.

"Yes, much better. Oreena that was a wonderful meal." Shirley smiled amazed that she did feel well. In fact, better than she had in years.

"It only gets better." Oreena sat and picked up her coffee cup.

The next few weeks were without disturbing visions. Shirley settled into a comfortable rhythm and was as happy as she could ever remember. Her job was the managing of Mrs. Archer's incredible wealth and she did it well. Some evenings were quiet and spent playing cards with both Mrs. Archer and Oreena. Others evenings, after one fine meal after another, were a full of lively conversation, or reading, with subsequent interesting discussions. There was a radio, and a television, but in the whole time she had been living in the house neither was ever turned on. Shirley was content keeping track of the doings in the world by Internet. When she had asked about the TV, both women seemed surprised and told her she could watch television if she would like. It just wasn't something they thought to do. Oreena opened the entertainment cabinet, inside was a flat large screen TV and hundreds of DVDs. Shirley got up and looked over the titles; great old movies from the thirties and forties were mixed in with newer titles. The library was a cinematic collection of the best films ever made.

"Why don't we have a Friday night movie night? Oreena, I can't remember when we last watched a movie." Mrs. Archer suggested.

"I will create meals that a person would find in a fifties Diner. Cheeseburgers, French fries…"

"Chocolate malts!" Shirley excitedly added.

"…Chocolate melts and onion rings." Oreena smiled.

"Oh Dear, Mrs. Archer is that a diet you can eat?" Shirley turned with her hands to her mouth.

"My Dear at my age, it doesn't matter. I'd rather enjoy the years I have left to me. That is why my sweet Oreena takes such care to provide such scrumptious feasts. Life can be sweet and it can be harsh. Yours has been unpleasant and we hope that your being with us will give you peace and a worthy life. Oreena? Let's watch a movie tonight. Do we have any of that Mexican chocolate with maybe even a little tequila? "Mrs. Archer winked at Shirley.

"Oh yes we do… what fun. I have a cinnamon and cream cheese pastry that will go well with dat drink. I'll prepare it. Shirley, let us watch Rio Bravo. I love that darling and good-looking Dean Martin. Ooooooeeeeeee! I'll tell you some time of dat hot time him and me had in Paris. It was scandalous, Scandalous!"

Shirley smiled, as she learned to do with her new friend. She turned to Mrs. Archer wondering at both women's need to please her.

"Mrs. Archer, please forgive my bluntness, I'm curious, there are brand new titles here." She reached in and pulled out a Disc that was a movie currently playing in theaters." This is still in the theaters."

"We haven't watched movies in a while only because we tired of it. I think we watched the first Matrix, how intriguing was that movie? That young actor was quite good in it, don't you think? Although, for me, that bending backward thing was a bit much. I do understand that the Matrix wasn't real, special effects, you know. Oh my, what they can do!" She spoke rhetorically. "You've re-energized our interest. As for the new titles, I have a service that provides only good films to me. I also have the newest Willie Nelson CD, Tony Bennett, and a remix of 'Charlie Parker Plays It Cool.' I knew him, such talent and such a need to burn life up. I'm also fond of Smash Mouth, even though they sold themselves to the machine. The Royal Crown Revue is a gas. Don't gape, Dear, it's unattractive. That Adam from American idol is something isn't he – saw him on the Internet? I have a service that provides the house with the best films and recordings. I don't usually care for the violent films, but that Leslie Snipe rocks my boat, but he hasn't done much lately." Mrs. Archer wiggled in her chair causing Shirley to silently pray for her. An elderly woman should not act in such a lascivious manner.

"I am not dead yet my Dear. Put in the CD, by the time we figure out how to get it running, Oreena will be back."

Shirley put aside her concern, sipped the laced chocolate and ate the confection. She was content to watch John Wayne and the lost Dean Martin and slip away.

She was in a saloon having just arrived by stagecoach. She was told the only accommodations were in this place, here in a house of iniquity. She was to meet Thaddeus Larch her soon to be new husband. The Agency had lied most grievously about

the civility of the town. It was a rough, unkempt gray, dusty, beige, and too hot. Little plant life could grow in such desolation. One sad tree adorned the small white church, she had seen coming in on the Coach. The men now in front of her, were filthy barbarians and the women were of the same profession as was the blessed Mary Magdalene, but clearly unrepentant in their sinful ways. She slammed her bags down and was immediately manhandled by a drunk, saying that he reminded her of his sister. He pawed her bosom and attempted to raise her skirt. She struck him down with her umbrella and wondered, in shock, at the relationship of such siblings. He rose even more ardent than before. She pulled a gun from the holster of a cowhand, judging by his smell, which at that unlucky moment had passed by. She cocked the pistol and fired shooting her amorous assailant in the head. He slammed to the floor, with a plume of blood spraying from the back of his head and was without a doubt dead. She stared in repulsed shock at what she, a refined woman, had done. The Sheriff soon arrived, taking her gun and assessing the scene. He asked for witnesses. The story was the same the woman came in and killed Thaddeus Larch, a gold prospector, who had just recently struck it rich, and had sent for a bride. The rest was a blur. The days blurred and she was tried by a Circuit Judge and found guilty. She was to be hanged. The whole town and the jury thought it was even worse a crime because it was her intended, she killed, if she had been more patient and married him, then killed him for his brutish ways, she would be rich and not as now facing the gallows. She said nothing in her defense. The next thing she knew she had a noose around her neck, and a black bag over her head. She heard the lever and the floor fell away.

She was again staring at John Wayne. Shaking and in a sweat.

"Close call, huh?" Oreena asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Shirley wheezed.

"They almost had him." Mrs. Archer sipped her Chocolate, her eyes on the TV screen.

"If you will forgive me, I don't feel well. I'm going to retire."

"A hanging can take a lot out of you." Oreena said, causing Shirley to start and stare at her.

"I'm making a joke. They should just shoot the guy and be done with it. Not much of a movie then, I guess."

"Oh, I'm sorry I thought…" The thought trailed off in exhaustion and the glimmer of a horrible memory. She went upstairs and climbed on her bed. She curled up tight and wept.

Downstairs the two women finished the movie. Mrs. Archer rolled into the kitchen where Oreena was straightening up.

"Well, my Dear. What do you think?" Mrs. Archer asked.

"Soon, very soon!"

Shirley rose early Saturday morning, to do a little shopping at the mall. The Horton mall was a blaze of colors and impossible to navigate levels. The site maps were

no help to her at all. She just allowed herself to wander and discover shops as they appeared to her. She found some treasures and eventually found the food courts, on the top levels. A trendy Chinese restaurant caught her eye and to lunch on Cantonese fare intrigued her. It was a food- type that, as far as she knew, Oreena did not see to prepare. The spark of lightening flew from a dark cloud, with a roar, and the air suddenly became misty and damp. She felt fear creep through her and she turned. The mall was empty except for the shadowy man standing darkly in an alcove, next to the entry to the restaurant. He glided over to her, as if he was floating. She was frozen with fear and a horrible sense of foreboding. The muttering was all around her. She screamed at him to make himself clear. The muttering became louder, till it filled the whole of her world. It was too loud. Nothing else was allowed in. She could feel the anger and frustration, in the garble of barely heard words and phrases. Shirley could take no more, she closed her eyes, and she screamed for him to shut up. The dampness was gone. She opened her eyes; the man and the mist was gone. All was as it was, crowded and clear. The yell must have only been in her mind, no one in the mall even noticed her. Insanity was taking her over; the only remedy she knew was the comfort of Mother Church.

She licked the last of the cinnamon roll off her fingers just as she stepped into the church office. A very unattractive woman greeted her and asked if she could help. Shirley was taken aback by the kindness of a voice coming from someone so denied even the smallest bit of delicacy. Then she shamefully acknowledged her sinful pride and thanked the women with as much sincerity as she could muster.

Father McNally was a kindly handsome man, with a perpetual smile frozen to his charming face. Shirley felt comfortable sitting in front of the cleric.

"How can we help you?" he folded his hands in a priestly fashion on his desk and bent over in a much-practiced way. All added to Shirley's ease.

"I don't know how to start." She blushed at the direction her thoughts were taking. He was, after all, handsome, but her lurid musings were sinful. He was a Priest and sworn to celibacy.

"Are you a parishioner here at our church?"

"I have just moved, well not just - I would like to start attending…"

"Well let's get you some information." He hit a buzzer before Shirley could stop him. "I think I keep seeing a demon." Shirley wished she could take the words back as the Priests well-practiced face broke in astonishment.

"Sara never mind the packet." He watched every movement of Shirley's face. After a stint in a special Shirley purgatory, he finally spoke. "Do you take drugs?"

"Heavens no!" Shirley lost interest and stood to leave.

"Please, forgive me." He stood to take her hand gently and led her back to her seat. "I had to ask. Others come in claiming that they have seen angels, vampires, werewolves, devils, and Mother Mary, all over the city. It is a beautiful city but it is a fraud. The homeless come here because of the weather, but there is little here for them past that. We have a mission down by the docks, run by a kind and hardworking Priest,

but he is like the boy with his finger in the dike. Please, you are most welcome. Sit and tell me about it."

The Priest sat in the chair next to her. Shirley instinctively scooted her chair back a bit. The Priest noticed the paranoia.

"I came from back east and took a position here in town."

"How interesting, I came from a Parish in Cleveland Ohio. I've been here for just a few months."

Shirley's eyes glazed over.

"I am not a crazy person. I consider myself quite sane and rational." She adjusted her skirt nervously. "This man has been stalking me."

"Why do you think he is a demon?" Father McNally put his hand on Shirley's thigh.

Shirley stood, red faced, and left without responding. She was so angry, she found herself spitting and cursing, all the way home. She opened the front door and Oreena was standing right there with a spoonful of something, that went right into Shirley's mouth. It was delicious and sucked the anger right out of her.

"Figured you needed something to take the shopping off you. No more though, the rest is for dinner."

"Thanks, Oreena, I'm going upstairs to take a nap. I got some presents, but you can't have them till later."

"Did I mention to you that the Priest, down here at the Church, is facing charges for sexual misconduct? Back east some place."

Shirley stopped short spinning on the stair. "What!"

"Nothing official yet." Oreena hollered from the kitchen.

Shirley stepped down off the stair landing and walked into the kitchen.

"Is it a coincidence that you two seem to be able to read my mind? Have I not one private thought? Some things should stay personal" Shirley barked.

"Why are you yelling?" Oreena was bent overlooking into the oven, where a pie was steaming away. Her bottom bounced to the beat of a reggae tune on the radio.

"I don't want to talk to your butt!" Shirley stomped her foot, then felt foolish.

"Are you stomping your feet at me, Girl?" Oreena turned, stood and crossed her arms in anger.

"I am getting concerned about certain…" Shirley tried to appear righteous.

"Shirley honey, I am sure you have thoughts that are disturbing to you. But why are you projecting on our dear employer and me? Have we been anything but kind to you? Have you ever been healthier? Look at you…you have filled out; you even have a great rack and a butt as fine as my own. I'll tell you mine has got me into more fun than…"

"What is going on here? I am trying to read. What is this talk of butts?" Mrs. Archer wheeled in smiling.

"It seems that Shirley is not satisfied with her breasts and fine pert ass."

"I beg your pardon. That was not what…" Shirley sputtered.

"My Dear, what is wrong with your body. I would love to be as young and attractive as you are. Oreena has filled in your frame with fabulous curves." Mrs. Archer patted Shirley's bottom. Shirley jumped and blushed.

"Mrs. Archer! That is not what…"

"Well, you look wonderful; and you are doing a great job. Oreena. What's for dinner?"

"Wheel yourself back to the parlor. This is my domain. You are the boss, but not in here. When you are disappointed in what I serve then I will leave and you can cook your own meals!"

Oreena shoved Shirley out and Mrs. Archer wheeled out laughing. "Oreena, you are a tyrant!"

Shirley screamed in frustration and ran out the front door.

She ran out into the dark, except for street gas lamps burning on a corner, to the right. The road was cobblestone and wet with a fine rain. Buildings were tall on all sides of the narrow street. She turned to go back into the house. It wasn't there. In its place was a raucous tavern that cast a welcoming fan of golden light on the narrow dark street. She looked down on herself and admired the black silk-hooped dress that swayed and swished as she moved. She felt shamefully free; under her dress was a lack of under garments and appropriate foundation. It titillated her to be walking here dressed as if she was a wanton. She saw the umbrella and leaned to pick it up. Confusion overcame her. Why was she in such a dreary and disreputable place?

A horse drawn carriage rolled up behind her, the door opened, and a low male voice called her name." Cynthia, will you please get in? You know this a perilous obsession."

"I would like to see where it happened." She put the umbrella up over her wet hair. She must look a fright. "Will you walk with me Edward, or not?"

"I will not! I have been indulgent and, you must admit, reasonable at this fascination of yours. The monster did indeed kill the trollops in this area and I think that your curiosity must surely be satisfied."

"Did he stab them in their abdomen first or slit their throats first?"

"Dear Lord, Cynthia, Enough! I must demand that you get in the carriage. Your father would have me arrested if he knew, for a moment, that I even brought you here."

The carriage followed Cynthia has she strolled down the dark street, twirling her umbrella. Suddenly two men ran out of the shadows, one jumped into the carriage, putting a pistol in Edward's face, demanding money. The second caught Cynthia, wrapping his arms around her. He whispered that she had a fine pair of pillows and that

he would see them full before the night was through. He thrust his hips into Cynthia's barely covered bottom. A shot fired behind her, then a second, a scream and the driver-less carriage rode by, led by terrified horses. Cynthia knew she had reached that place she longed for. She was standing on the rim of hell. She had hoped that it would be the Ripper she would have met. Her lurid and dark imaginings would have it that he would recognize her as a lady and would stay his Royal hand. Her reckless fantasy was dissipating in horror. No one would come to her aid, and she would foolishly die in the most terrible of ways. Her Edward was gone, as was her salvation.

"Kill me if you will gentlemen. Please do no worst. My father will pay any ransom." Cynthia spoke with a quiet and calm voice in spite of her fear.

"My Dear, we have plenty, thanks to your now deceased, but well healed, young man." A fetid breath came upon her. "We will give you back to your Father only slightly ruffled. Me brother and me would only have what Edward already enjoyed, as we heard earlier, parked in that fine carriage. We knows you, me fine Lady, come down here to the filthy byways of us lowborn and gives it a sloppy try, where it gives you, a proper Lady, a naughty tickle. If you like it naughty, me and my brother will give you naughty for your fill"

Cynthia heard a terrible laugh behind her.

"Fill it we will, Brother! Fill it we will."

She felt hands around her throat and swooned. When she awoke, she was lying on a filthy bed and was completely naked. Her wrists were bound and tied to a ring on the wall behind her. Her legs were spread and her ankles lashed to the footboard. Her throat was sore and she coughed, in a dry hacking bark, causing her head to pound.

"Well now! Look who's awake? We relieved your Ladyship of her togs; it was easy enough for the little there was. You are, after all, a proper tart, aren't you? The first counting of our spoils and a meal were more important to us than ruinin' your Ladyship's good name. We haven't had our way as of yet! All things in their proper time, I always says."

The brother spit. "He always says that he does."

"But we enjoyed the looking and the pawin' on your body. It was no wonder his Lordship was groaning and grunting on you. We were sourly tempted to put patience aside. Does that surprise you that we wastrels could control our nasty urges?"

She said nothing. She was beyond hope. The brother walked over from the table, stripped and climbed on her." Enough waiting for the likes of me."

She screamed!

Shirley screamed into the San Diego night and passed out. The fog covered her like a blanket. The shadowy man came over and picked her up in his arms.

Shirley wasn't Shirley anymore. She was Evelyn Amsted and she had been raped by her Priest, was alone in the night, and dying in a downtown Cleveland alley. She saw a man walking through the fog. She tried to call for help but she couldn't. Her world was

pain, horror, betrayal, and outrage. The man walked up to her and stared down at her near nude shattered and bloodied body. Her mind screamed and jumped into him.

The man walked up to the door and it opened. Oreena let the man in. He bent down and placed Shirley on the sofa in the sitting room. Mrs. Archer did not move.

"Goland, why have you waited this long?" Oreena took his overcoat.

The man was not a man at all. His face was not human; it had no hair on his greenish head, two holes for a nose, no ears, and a lip-less mouth. He, he was male, sat on a chair next to Mrs. Archer, who still sat perfectly still not looking at her visitor.

"Mrs. Archer, Goland is here." Oreena fretted over Shirley.

"Mr. Goland it is good to see you." Mrs. Archer came alive and wheeled her chair around to look into Goland's face." You don't look good, too pale. Have you been eating well? Oreena do you have anything that will suit an Anterian diet?"

"I have some Tarash and Jemeee." Oreena offered, bowing her head.

Their guest mumbled and nodded. He turned to Mrs. Archer and murmured in a low hum, putting his hands together in a praying manner.

"That was kind of you to dispatch the monster. I'm sorry it took so long to find out if the time permutations would allow the Priest’s termination. This is such an unusual case. We are still working on your problem. Please be patient." Mrs. Archer looked at Shirley. "We'll see when she wakes whether we can set this straight."

Oreena came in with a large Anterian ceremonial bowl. The man's eyes watered and he bowed in his chair. He stood and then sat on the floor. Oreena set the bowl on the table, and then laid down a cloth marked with symbols on the floor in front of Goland. She then put the bowl on the cloth. She turned to the mantle and lit a candle and placed it on one edge of the cloth. Mrs. Archer reached over and turned off the light. The Anterian ate slowly and sang between each bite. The two women sat and patiently waited mesmerized by the beauty of the singing. When he was through, Oreena broke the bowl in four pieces, wrapped the pieces in the cloth and carried it all out of the room. When she returned, the Anterian was sitting on the chair, the candle was put up, and the lights were on again.

Shirley stirred and opened her eyes and started at seeing the Anterian.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Goland. I thought you were a human. I reacted out of fear. Had I known; I would never have done such a despicable deed." She looked at Oreena and Mrs. Archer." Damn, a healer/cleaner and a Quatadroid, I'm in a mess."

"Yes, you have made a mess. The woman was supposed to die much earlier and not by that monstrous Priest. You should have got out long before you did. What were you thinking? A paradox was most certainly created but luckily it changed little. Did you think you could save her?" Oreena scolded.

"Yes!"

"The rules are specific. We are allowed to come back through the veils of time to feel the sensations. Emotional ties are dangerous but it does happen. If it does, you are to die with your host. That's the rules and it's written in stone." Mrs. Archer droned.

"I know. But it was more horrible than you could have imagined." Shirley began to cry.

"Push Shirley back, but her to sleep. You have done enough damage. We have done much to make this poor girl well and we will not have you destroy her for your selfishness." Oreena pleaded for the girl she had befriended.

"Done. She will think it all a dream. I lost control due to the trauma and jumped into Goland. The poor thing had two of us in him, the victim and me. When I could, I jumped an attempted an integration with Shirley. But she remembered the whole affair as her own. I disengaged from my previous host and let her die. Shirley would not let the memory of the event go; it suited a pre-existing condition. The poor girl was ill and, again, I made a horrible error. Oreena, you were brilliant in the way you healed us. Those colorful memories all yours, from previous time jumps?"

"I didn't give you both the good ones. You couldn't handle it. And by the way, I do cook Chinese brilliantly. It would have had you break through to soon."

Mrs. Archer buzzed a warning that she was going to speak the rule and lore. Quatadroids were made in the time stream in which they lived and where judge and jury on all time violations.

"Humans evolved into non-corporeal beings in the year 6456 CC. It took three thousand years to become bored with a live without sensory input. And the live webs began to fade and dissipate in many souls. So it was that we sent ourselves back into the past, so that we may share experiences with our hosts and gain strength. Strong personalities threw us out, or medicated us senseless, thinking us demons, or mental aberrations. We then choose those who were weaker, hanging closely to death, or those who we knew would be killed. We are allowed a three-year visit and then must go home. You were to report to a regional Quatadroid and be sent back. We were forced to send back a cleaner/healer at considerable energy expense. Oreena is too old to travel but she was the most qualified."

"Never mind, I enjoyed cooking again. My host is brilliant." Oreena laughed. "I'm no worse for the wear. I however must stay in this body, until the old dear passes away. I can't go home."

"I admit I did a terrible thing. Just before death, I transferred into the closest human near me. I didn't know it was an Anterian Priest Class. I defiled him. He knows all of human history intimately; he knows we are not to be defeated by the Anterians. He has shared a soul with an enemy and that is taboo. Even if he could save billions of lives, he cannot be heard. His superiors would smell the taint on his thoughts. I also know five thousand years of Anterian secrets and their agenda, of which I can do nothing to save any of their lives. I jumped to Shirley as soon as I could. Poor Goland has been following me for ten years, carrying human memories, insane, and desperate for a solution. We all know there is but one solution. It is a disaster. He is polluted and outcast, I am a criminal,

and a risk. You, Oreena, gave an honorable death meal to Goland, so that he may join his ancestors with pride. What will you do for me?"

"You will just dissipate and believe, like Shirley, that there is a heaven waiting for you. She is saved, so I guess you are as well. You will leave her with us and she will live a good and fulfilled live." Oreena answered.

"Fair enough. At least it is tidied up. Shirley lay down and closed her eyes.

Mrs. Archer put her hands in front of her, a swirling blue light emanated from the palms of her hands, and a reddish light lifted from Shirley, and slowly gave way to the blue light. Goland sang a beautiful song, about the gift of life, and its uncertain choices. He sang one last beautiful note, bent over, and expired.

The next morning Shirley ran downstairs in a glorious mood. She ran into the kitchen.

"Oreena, I'm starving. What's for breakfast?"

"Blintzes, sausage, and fresh fruit."

"Do I have time for a short run?"

"Give me an hour, darling girl. Did I ever tell you the thing I had with Dean?"

"Dean Martin?" Shirley asked.

"No! James Dean."

"Cool, tell me all the nasty details, when I get back!"

Mrs. Archer rolled into the kitchen. "What about James Dean?"

"Oreena is going to tell us about a scandalous affair with James Dean."

"Oh good. I like the juicy ones. Have a nice run sweetheart!"

Shirley waved and was out the door.

End

Circumstance

You wake up, raggedy man
knowing the dread will roll again
you’re locked in your story
hoping for dormant glory

while the bad luck sets in

You have laid down your cards
thinking you had the better hand
three kings and a wild deuce
I tell you it ain't no use
when four aces make a better stand

Love never finds a raggedy man
find some kindness if you pay
breathe hard against a wall
no names at all
for you it's better that way

This city is too rough a place
for your vapid sensibilities
your every dream is crashing
lighting flashing
too small a light to see

You can pull up a stool
order a draft, dirty glass
look about, have a laugh
lustrated, lowly guild
these lurid ragtag people
who fell off the road like you

Bitter, cold, anechoic
dirty and justly blue
they agree with you
there ain't nothing to do,
keep your eyes open raggedy man

Something may come your way
find some opportune circumstance
a score to set you free
that would be your lucky day
maybe find you a better road

I hope you find that clement angel
one that would fly up ahead a little ways
accede raggedy man and dance
mark your dour ways
oh, shoddy raggedy man

Life always offers an outcome to a game. Winning and losing is often hard to identify. But sometimes things are hopeless. And when that terrible realization comes upon you it is profound. And what if the game you were playing was a much bigger one than you thought and every move you made was for a smaller game.

THE WAY THINGS ARE

The room wasn't much. It was dingy as everything is on this god-awful Rock. Gray dust found its way even into closed places, covering everything in an ultra-fine film. The Hostel was one of the best in the enclave. There were four mining camps on the Rock, each about five hours travel distance from each other. He looked around the room, a small bed, clean sheets and old coverlet, ugly painted four-drawer dresser, bed stand, and a lamp with an exposed bulb. He giggled at the lace doily on the dresser. He went to the window and looked down on the dark street, empty, between work shifts. Large half pipe Quons lined up in a row across the dirt gray street, homes and business's all as gray drab as the next. He remembered the Home, blue, green, shades of brown, and clouds like phantoms floating across the fine blue skies. Water... he couldn't remember the sound of water, fountains, waterfalls, rivers pouring over rock, and seas crashing on sandy shores. He had forgotten, too, the smell of the sea.

He sat on the edge of the bed and poured out the contents of his side bag; two tins of mystery meat hit the bed first. The tins contained real meat; it didn't matter to him what species of animal provided the meat. He had eaten it before. It was consistent, gristle free, and not bad tasting. There was a can of some variety of fruit, and a can of something called Vegilly. The label touted it as multi-vitamined and mineraled. Two tins of custard, and a bottle of pure water, rounded out the fare. He fished in his overcoat pockets and pulled out the most expensive thing he had purchased, a small bottle of an eighty-proof booze, made from a cactus that somehow took a hold in The Rocks barren soil. There was no real sun, only a series of satellites circling The Rock, and beaming down weak rays, fueled by burning hydrogen. The light was as dim as a full moon on his home world.

"Not all bad I suppose… the way things are. “He muttered to himself.

She knocked on the door, two-three-two, as was her custom when he came to the Enclave. It was a business arrangement but it was always pleasant. He opened the door and looked at her. She hadn't changed much in the year since he had last seen her. Maybe

she was a little more life worn, but still cute and petite, with a blond haircut styled short, like his. She was made up, like she was going to a social.

"What's with the paint?"

"Nice to see you too.

"Sorry…it's good to see you."

"Didn't know whether I was alive, did you?"

"Well."

"True…I dressed up a bit…I heard you were coming."

"How did you hear …thought it was a secret?"

She peeled off her jumpsuit and threw down her side bag. She was wearing a skimpy nice near- white lacy thing.

"Dinner too?" She squeaked.

"We are going to shower together."

"What?"

"I have a half hour."

"How did you swing that?" She looked down at the food on the bed. "Do we eat first, or get it on with the sudsy hugging?"

"Let's shower first."

"You want me without makeup, no perfume, no wig, and no lace?"

"We are going to do it naturally. I had myself smoothed... I know you don't like hairy."

"God, you are sweet. I have missed you."

They touch of another was almost too much, but sadly needed. They ate their feast and then they did it again. They fell asleep and she left before morning, to avoid any embarrassment. Their relationship was a tragedy and a farce, but they did hopelessly care for each other. She didn't ask for money. He sent her money each quarter-cycle to help make her life a little easier, and to have her always clear her schedule, when he came here.

It was an arrangement that worked for them.

He woke to the morning horn. The dim dawn came and cheered him a bit.

The Group, the ruling council, had wanted to be rid of the false suns, because it was expensive and a useless ritual that just no longer mattered. The citizens, however, shouted them down, apparently it did matter.

At dawn social clubs opened, providing music, free cheap brew, and a place where unattached males and females could legally commingle. There was no mating without permits. Doing so, without a ticket, got you ugly time in the pen. It was easier

and less painful to get the permit. The fee for the permit included mate-safe spray and a contraceptive, no disease, and no babies.

He liked the newer Clubs, certain relics, and decor had been permitted, from the home world. They were bittersweet reminders of home and perhaps another subtle cruelty heaped on an already beaten people.

He wasn't here to work and his appointment, with The Group, wasn't till late this afternoon. He decided to have a beer and listen to some music. He heard there was a club, close by, that had a band that played old-timey folk music.

He wasn't disappointed; he drank a great expensive dark and tipped the band copiously. He was almost lost in rapture and forgot for just a moment where he was. Tears of happiness rolled down from his eyes. As the band played, he remembered the before times. The bar keep brought him another dark ale saying that The Group allowed him an open tab. He probably should have drunk the free swill, but knowing what was going to asked of him, the drinking of expensive ales was not going to be enough of a payment. He looked at the frosty mug and was further saddened. He used to be a pilot, once upon a time, and he laughed. He was surely, now, too old to fly, even if he wanted to. He shook the hands of the musicians, once the most honored of his people. He praised them as the most important people on this Rock. They were young, not really understanding the words, or emotions, behind the songs they played. It was the playing them that mattered. He went to the bar and sat staring at his reflection in the bar mirror; he wondered why he reflected back at all. The Keep told him he could have as many brews as he wanted. He told him to pour himself and the band members each a dark, bill The Group, dream of a better place, and with honor keep him occasionally in mind.

The bar Keep smiled and said, "Thank you honored Warrior, and we have been made better by your grace."

He was astounded that the young man knew the old customs. He stiffened and bowed to the Keep from his waist.

"Thank you for your kindness, but I am now a working man, and that is the only honor I ask for."

The Keep and the Band all nodded and smiled.

***

The Group called him and he came as summoned. It would be an insult not to appear. He sat on a Hassock …this was troubling. The Hassock indicated high honor and grave seriousness. In front of him, seated at a half-circled low table, was The Group. The table was designed so that all members of the Group were the same distance from their guests. This way each guest was assured that the case presented would be heard equally. This was not such an occasion. There was no case. He was invited, without explanation, and that did not bode well.

"You are a Warrior, are you not?" The youngest female Group member blurted with a slight sneer.

"I am now a Miner, Group member, with respect?"

"I am sorry! That was rude of me."

He stood up and looked at her, his skin color darkening in anger. It was a long silence. He had the right to kill her for the insult. She was so young, he wondered if she even knew that it was an insult. There certainly was no need for custom, or tradition, here. He was tired and really didn't care, so he sat down.

"What the hell…the way things are." He muttered to himself while lowering his head.

The Group all had unconsciously fallen back from the table, and now all were confused at their guest's show of diffidence. They were embarrassed and humiliated. It was not supposed to go this way.

Things quieted and the tension eased. His color returned to pink, while most of the Group still remained viridescent in fear and subjugation. The young female stood up, walked out to stand before their guest. She dropped and lay face down on the worn carpet.

"So, you do know?" He whispered to her so that the rest could not hear. "It does sadden me, Child. But it makes little difference. Thank you!"

The rest of the Group watched in silence.

He looked at her and wept quietly at the devotion to one so unworthy. She made a mistake often made by the Young. We have so few Young, intelligent, and wise enough, to take on the responsibility of the Group.

He started to sing an ancient song of praise and devotion to the family, clan, and the honor endowed the First Compacts. The Group, each one overcome with emotion, for they have never heard it sung, but only read the words in the Old Text.

He reached down and patted the young female's head with obvious affection.

"Rise up! No harm is done."

She, with a tear-stained face, stood, and returned to her seat behind the table.

It was the Senior Seat Elder that spoke, after a time of honest silence, allowing everyone the opportunity to compose themselves.

"Please Elder Warrior, forgive us. We shame ourselves in our ignorance of the proper protocols. It has been too long since we have been so honored by someone of your stature. We are a shadow of what was. We offer no excuses just …"

"Speak no more of it. Yes, dear one, I am a Warrior, but there is no war. Now, I am barely a competent miner. We now sell the ore we mine, to our former enemy."

The entire Group flushed red in shocked surprise then looked at each other for some way to respond. What he had done was the highest honor a Warrior could bestow. It was a revelation, putting them in awe of the one they dared to have sat in front of them. A Warrior had spoken 'Truth' to them. They knew it was a way for him to equalize all in attendance. Plain and free speaking was now demanded.

The Second Seat Female composed herself first. She appeared not much younger than the First Seat.

"Warrior we thank you from our hearts and souls. Do you agree that because of the way things are… life has become intolerable?"

He nodded.

"The Fourth Seat spoke." There is no one alive who remembers the war except you. We apologize that the extra privileges given you do not, in the remotest way, repay what you have endured."

The whole Group nodded assent and waited for a response. It didn't come. The Warrior was sitting with his eyes closed as if he was remembering those awful days. A full five minutes passed in silence. Then he spoke quietly.

"It is just so!"

"Just so…" The Second Seat blurted in improper excitement, "…we toil our days away in duty to each other. We can read the words of historians but it's not the same. Will you tell us the story Warrior? Please!"

She stood. Her color was pale in Body Respect. She bowed deeply knowing the danger of this appeal. The others went pale and looked at the reaction of the Warrior. Then they too stood and bowed full at the waist. The Fifth Seat took a while to color properly; such disrespect to the Group will have him sent to the lower levels of the mines, where he will die from heat exhaustion, after a few years of toil.

The Warrior thought of words he had once read, in a slain enemy's holy book. 'How have the mighty fallen.'

He sat and allowed the full remembering to take him, shedding his miner's persona. Hormones flooded his body. His skin turned to Warrior purple. Even though the Group were to remain in the submissive position the Warrior heard gasps. He forgave them. The color had fallen into myth. He ripped off the jumpsuit. He would no longer need to be protected from the bitter cold of this ugly Rock. Body horns and scales began to form. He shamefully screamed in pain singing 'The Song' to control his responses to The Change. His jaw extended, teeth grew to their true length and terror. His body grew to three times his normal size. Claws grew from fingernails, and a second thumb grew from the other side of each hand. A spiked tail grew from the tip if his spine. He howled for meat. He was exhausted and required an infusion of protein. The group had only hoped for this honor, but they had prepared for it. A huge tray of meat was placed in front of him. The aide placed the plate, jumping out of the way just in time to avoid the swipe of weak but still horrible claws. He devoured the meat in minutes. Then he rested in

silence. The whole transformation took a little less than thirty minutes, during that entire time the group kept their bowed position. Any sharp movement would have provoked the Warrior and then the expensive meat tray would have not been necessary.

Finally, the Warrior spoke. "All is well! I have become Warrior and am no danger to you. There is no enemy here."

The Group stretched and sat starring in wonder at what sat in front of them. He was massive and splendid. He was a fighting monster, a horror, and the vanguard of pain and death to the enemies of the People. They were in awe and ashamed to have him do this for them. It was the most intimate thing a Warrior could share and the most dangerous for those who witness the transformation.

The Warrior began the telling.

"We found them first. We had just achieved star drive, as did they. In all the suns and planets of this galaxy our two races learned and grew up on the exact same timeline. Not a day, or a year, or a century of development separated us. When the big beasts died, because of a massive comet, it happened on both worlds. When the little furred warm-blooded ones came out after the disaster, it happened on both worlds. A bearded one came down from a mountain with clay tablets, with the Word of God written upon them. Pyramids and Saviors, Kings and Priests, all came like twins to both worlds. When the great empires died, and the religions terrorized the world, it happened on both worlds. Wars with arrows, wars with cannon, wars with tanks and trenches, wars with planes and bombs, wars with atomic weapons, wars with biologicals, wars of words, death and genocide, shamed both worlds at exactly the same time. Every political experiment, every philosophy, every noble and decent act, every time we touched God, it was mirrored by them. Every time the Devil took possession of our hearts, he won on their planet as well. Both worlds were a polluted green and blue, and in near ruin for our plundering and ravishing. Then came another asteroid to both worlds, and our two races were almost destroyed, those that survived formed Clans and Houses. Centuries passed, the First Compacts were signed by all Clans and Houses. And the Enlightened Time was on us and we both made advances in science, the arts, and medicine. Every citizen, of both worlds, prospered and glowed in health and intellect. But there was a snake in both gardens. We had survived so God must have blessed us as his chosen. Religion again raised its organized best and demanded that we again expand and multiply. There were other worlds, and we need not harm the paradise we had made, by excess and wasteful actions. We no longer had to pollute, over fish, deforest, or deplete the liquid energy deep underground. Both worlds' rich and prosperous Ministers preached the blessedness of science, and so, we went to the other planets to exploit their recourses. Then we went to the stars by the thousands, in a religious frenzy, with biological computers, and God's good graces. They found a living world first. God changed the rules. The third planet of a world circling a yellow star we called Ce-este . They had settled there just six years before. There were one hundred fifty thousand alien, and heathen, squatters on this our God-given planet, our beautiful blue green world that God had promised us. We of course carried weapons on our ship. We rained down terror on the unfaithful, and then slaughtered those who did not die in the bombardment. On their bones and ashes, we settled it in their place. They came, of course, in righteous vengeance and wiped our colonists out most cruelly. We could not let them have this planet, so we came fifty years

later with a weapon of consummate arrogance and evil; we brought a killer of millions, a world killer. We blew up the planet and all upon it. We destroyed the only inhabitable world within the reach of either species. And so, the War started. It lasted two hundred years; war in space is tedious, each engagement taking an enormous amount of time to develop. Once started it was no less bloody and horrifying. We, and they, needed a warrior suited to space battles, long lived, durable to changes in environments, and pressures, a terrifying and powerful killer, a nightmare to look upon, and in its brain an enhancement, a brilliant biological computer. The war was being fought to a standstill. Each world kept the battle in space, hiding the location of each other's world. They first found the world we destroyed, and they found our home world first. They killed everyone on our planet with a nasty slow acting virus, although we were alike in most ways, each race changed by the environmental damage we had done to our home worlds. There were differences. When we created Warriors, a genetic variation showed up in the whole of our species eukaryotic cells. A viral based metamorphic agent that created the Warriors escaped the labs on our world in an altered less virulent form. It had no effect on our population and wouldn't have for some three hundred generations. But it did leave a chink in our immune systems.

A frozen parasite, arriving on a rouge comet fragment twenty-five thousand years ago, found a symbiotic relationship living inside the gut of the enemy. It stabilized their genome and fortified their immune system. God again had shuffled the deck. We had Warriors first because they had to unlock the effect of the parasite's benefit. They captured one of our pilots and found the difference. They invented the bug, and the antidote. God blessed them, not us. Even our Warriors were vulnerable to the disease. Only I was immune, due to a primitive trash gene that hung on, in my family, from ancient times. They colonized our planet in lieu of the one we destroyed. A rag-tag remnant of our kind hid in space.

When the long-range star expeditions came back, those two hundred thousand souls in those great star ships had found no home in the stars. They found the other refugees, and our tale of stupidity and woe. Our enemy captured them, as each ship entered the captured home system. When all were home, fifty thousand were executed. There was no trial, why would there be – we were most certainly guilty. The rest were sent here to the Rock.

I survived and avoided execution, because I was stranded alone in an escape pod for five years, frozen and dreaming of victory. Instead, I was thawed and sent to this Rock, to share the punishment for what our species did to theirs, and for the unpardonable sin of destroying a world. Perhaps, a fit punishment if we took the time to think on it.

We have been here these many tedious generations; I have suffered life for more than four hundred years. I am the oldest of us all. We will never be more than the number we killed on their colony. We will never be Clan and House again. We will never be allowed into heaven for our sins. We will dig in a great gray hole, here, and in the afterlife forever.

I was the only Warrior to survive of our world. Their Warriors came home from war and knowing that there would not be another enemy to fight, asked to be allowed to die. This was granted, with the all the Honor and Glory they deserved.

Their last Warrior to die said:

"The way things are, may God forgive us and let us into Heaven."

And the saying has stuck with us in short form. The whole prayer or curse we say is "The way things are - may the bastards find an enemy in the stars more horrible and more powerful than us. Amen"

The Warriors face beseeched the Group to let him rest, to let him die. He knew he was his people's last symbol of hope. They would never grant him his request.

"Thank you for the truth. We dare to ask you one last favor."

"Speak!" He said.

The First Spoke, "Above the table, to your left, you will find an alcove. In it is a spherical object. It is a bomb. It is a powerful device, which we have secretly built. We ask you, Warrior, to detonate it when you see fit. It will put our species to rest. The contest for survival has played out between the Humans and us. We are without hope. The Clerics believe that it is the same throughout the Universe, the will of God. He creates three beautiful worlds, on two he raises sister species, and the third he leaves open. The Humans called it Eden. It is the truest of Trilogies. Vast space separates these worlds from the other sets of three. Each time there is a Holy War and one Species survives. And maybe there is justice; maybe the winner can learn to travel further and faster, find another sister world that has won their contest and they two must fight it out. And on, and on it would go until there was left only one race, a race of Angel-Beasts, who will be humbled by God for their arrogance and madness. Then, God will empty the universe and start the game again."

The warrior responded. "I do not agree Elder, if the Clerics who brought us to this place are finally correct, then our souls must have a place in Heaven, one for all the sinful foolish and vain, one that was made before all else was made. He knew one must lose and one must win, no matter how it is done. In that place we will find rest and wait on the next universe. We may stay in the game a bit longer the next time around."

A gong sounded a deep mournful tone ending the meeting.

The Warrior asked the Group for accommodations and privacy. It was granted. He returned to the shape of a miner. It took an excruciating three days.

So now, he sat in his room. He worked in the mine for another year. He did it in humility so that if God could forgive them. He would come to heaven as he was made in his mother's womb.

He opened the drawer, next to his bed, and looked with pride at his now shed fighting-horns and tail spikes. He moved his bed, threw back the rug and opened the trap door. He had dug a vault and lined it with lead; in it he had placed the device. He took out the bomb, sat down, and put it on his lap. It will turn the Rock, and all on it, into dust.

The way things are.

He pushed the sequence and the red button. With the flash his last thought was...

"Thank God!"

END

Four Horses

Wretched this knavish man, forlorn and so rudely cast aside
Now hunched in hiding there beneath a forest's moonlit tree
Muttering baleful plottings, requital for judging his misdeeds
Hating every one of his unequal peers for supposed inequity

He heard the sound of horse's hoofs upon the forest floor
Beating a raucous counterpoint to a sweet and gentle lilt
He turned to see an old man and perhaps his daughter fair
Covertness eyed four horses and jewels upon a daggers hilt

In the full moon's glare, he planned a brutish and dour deed
An act he deemed fit and fair to lift him from cruel poverty
He would slay the man and take what he so sorely importuned
His lascivious and abysmal appetites would teach her passivity

He crept in the shadows while the four horses gaily frolicked
White, red, black, and pale, a poor thief's dreamed treasure
He climbed the stones above and perched to aim his gun
In his head he counted every coin and then again for measure

He closed his eyes and thanked whatever Jinn had just passed by
For good fortune such as this could not come to a man of woe
Opening eyes to again take aim but only horses stood in the glade
Each equine eye was upon him there and fired a bale evil glow

A deep voice behind made him to start and slowly turn about
There the two stood in splendent finery glaring with wide black eyes
'Did you think' he said 'that you would kill and then roguish reap virtue?
'Abyssus abyssum invocat' she said, 'such a life fosters foolish lies.'

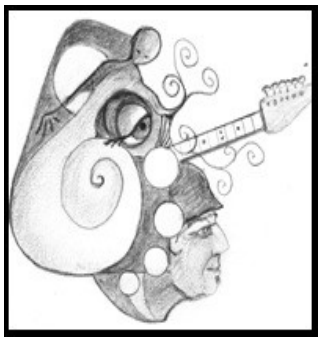
A silent dread pinned the man to the earth, helpless and flat upon his back

‘Those steeds you would have for fortune gained are the Dark Prince’s very own
They are our charges and we will give them up when Gabriel’s trumpet sounds
Upon them will set the ruin of the world, but your time to choose as come anon.’

‘Here is the way that it shall unfurl’ she said ‘You will join us and be our squire.
You will serve contrite but share our sunless company for all eternity.’
Or we will take your life and send your dark soul to Sheol’s fiery gate
And in the Master’s court you will give account for intended infamy

Trembling, the man asked could there be another choice that he could make
Then every fear the man had ever known rushed in with what was seen
The two, graven pale, with lips of rose red, did bare great glistening fangs
‘Either way’ they said ‘we will have our way; it is the way it has always been’

Reality is perception, perception is subjective, shit happens and you have to deal with it. Are there conspiracies? Hell yes, everywhere and all the time. Are there secret organizations and stuff they don’t let the people know? Of course, there is. The truth is - why would you want to know? Possibilities are uncomfortable. Reality is saner, and safer, if we all make it up and agree on it. Multiple realities are too confusing. Some stuff is just downright scary. Enlightenment may be over-rated and sameness and normality have their appeal. Ask this guy, he knows.



WHO’S TO SAY

The Stones just started playing. They weren't my favorite band; I liked Canned Heat. I didn't get to Woodstock because I was preoccupied in a conflicted 'elsewhere' when that rainy, ill planned, mucky mess of a celebration of peace took place. Although a long way from there to here, weirdness always followed me like a dark cloud with a sense of humor. It was different there, in the jungle, than here - me sitting astride a chopped '74', wearing denim and leather, pretending to be a security guard at an outdoor rock concert touted to be another 'Celebration of Peace'.

That is to say, I was pretending. Life, to me, had long ago lost its ability to be a seamless, sensible, and controllable whole. My life was hardly a celebration of anything, so I took it as it came. Some of my biker Brothers took their new jobs as 'rock star police'

pretty seriously. But they take everything seriously, even having fun; being in a constant pissed off state separated them from the flower children that undulated all around them. It was brought down to the difference between the mind states produced by LSD and Pot verses that of Speed and Jack Daniels.

No one gave the bikers any guidelines, not that they would listen. Whoever it was that thought that there were any moral, philosophical, or ethical merge - lines between Bikers and Hippie Flower Types really had some wires crossed - far worse than those mis-colored wires that ran the engine of my life. Perhaps it had something to do with my bent wiring and me. My being there, like a rolling stone, on that terrible day, was probably the cause of what would next happen. My sour emanations oozed, out and all it took was for one poor, innocent, peace-loving, fat guy to go and express himself, and all hell broke loose.

That's when I saw 'them' again. You can tell me that the little orange pill I swallowed, with a pint of Old Crow, had something to do with it. But I had seen the nasty little green scaled fuckers before in Nam and all I was 'there'- that is- the state of my mind, was scared shitless. These rock concert demons fading in and out of shadow, then solid and ugly, with the beat of the bass drum. When the ruckus broke out, Charlie was wailing, the ugly beasts were just there dancing, in and among the mostly unaware long hairs, grotesquely jerking to Charlie's kick-high-hat- snap.

Then the brother wielded the knife and the storm started.

"I'm a man of wealth and means…" For some reason Mick stopped singing.

I looked up at Jagger and saw his horrified face. Man, he could see them too. Hell, he was yelling at them to stop. Some of them did, for a moment, and then laughing at him, dove back in the melee, hitting, biting and gleefully howling even louder. Jagger kept screaming and Richards stood there at a complete loss, oblivious, or just sure that there was nothing to be done. I wondered how they came to see the scaly brutes, never mind that they actually thought they had some control over them. Poor bastards, what a way to break up a set, too bad, they were just beginning to cook. Maybe I was just imagining it. I am not the most reliable witness, after all. Time travelers that see things are not by the nature of their ability good witnesses. Context is the problem. Seeing an event is all well and good, but the meaning of the event is lost to you. It is my guess that prophets of old were time travelers and were terrible at recounting what they saw, so bad, in fact, that they were often stoned to death. No thank you, I'll not make that claim - I am no prophet. I leave this record for posterity, for my own reasons. As to the concert, I guess no one else present saw the beasts, or wanted to say they saw them. Given how many loaded minds were witness, how could they? No mention of that bizarre part of the concert was ever reported.

But I had seen the first one, greenish and scaled, sitting on the stage, right next to the brother playing with his, soon to be, murderous knife. The brother was clearly wasted, with a squirrelly-brain clearly wrought in an insane forge, and the demon, mostly unnoticed, was whispering in his ear and pointing his talon-decorated hand at the big naked dancing guy. The more the monster whispered the madder the brother got. Then bang like a shot the riot was on. It was no place for a peace loving, red necked, free rider of the open road, to be - so off I went. Engine purring, I chanted a prayer for the soul of

that unfortunate son and that justice would be meted out. I cursed the foul things, as windswept my hair. I had to take some responsibility and was pretty bluesy about it. I may look the heathen but I'm not.

***

South seemed right. I motored back to my shop and I tried to remember some David Allen Coe tunes to sing and hum along a slowly darkening highway. "You can call me Darling, Darling…"

I stopped for coffee and a piece of chocolate crème pie at my favorite diner in Independence.

***

I mentioned Nam.

Here is how an unreliable witness remembered his piece of it.

I was a snot-nosed Ensign fresh out of MIT, with an odd Ph.D. in Speculative Engineering. I had allergies, then, of every kind, all made me miserable - and I had been assigned as over-qualified baggage, to some seasoned guys, to refit something or other, somewhere, at one of our bases deep in-country Vietnam. Using me to re-fit some generators, or to fix broken down diesels, was typical of Military thinking at the time, over-think the useless thing, and under think the thing that mattered…or so I thought. The truth - I was valuable because I could fix things with whatever was at hand. Ph.D. aside, I was a good Wrench.

No one talked to me and it didn't take long to figure out that this was not a typical mission. I had been pumped up with every Anti-allergen the Military knew and a mix of other stuff they made up. Four months of Air force Special-Ops training had me fit and hard. I was still a liability to the five guys with whom I now kept quiet company. It didn't take long, however, for me to prove myself something other than baggage. We were inserted, by helicopter, in the dark, with a rope drop, just short of the Cambodian border. I deported myself well. With a thumbs-up and a nod from Number One, we moved quickly to cover and got our bearings. In less than fifteen minutes we were on a hard run. I had no idea where we were going, or why. As we passed over the border to Cambodia my expectation of surviving this little adventure was diminishing with each step.

We hit them in the dark just short of dawn. They had to know we were coming, but I think we surprised them. Number one took one in the forehead and went down backward, in an eerie boneless heap. Point swung back and lined us to the left in a rill for better cover. Number two gestured us down has he moved into the dark and wet. I didn't like the idea of leaving someone behind. Our mission, whatever it was, precluded our thinking ourselves anything but expendable. Dead before you get there - so no worries. Number Three pulled out a pair of night-vision binoculars and perused the jungle ahead of us. There was a light green glow off to the right. Number Three pulled out a small pack, opened it, and set up a miniature machine gun with self-feeding belts. I had never seen anything like it. We moved off down into the small creek and attempted to flank the enemy. The gun left behind burst periodically, as an attempt to draw fire. It worked. I would have liked to look that clever gun over.

Suddenly, something, or someone, hit me and I was fighting for my life. Pain drilled up my left arm and I, briefly, saw the small knife hilt buried in my forearm. I was enraged and tore into my tormentor. I grasped his neck and, with strength I didn't know I possessed, snapped it. The man fell to the ground and I on top of him. I was completely out of breath, gasping like a fish out of water, my lungs screaming for air that would not come.

I rolled off the body and found myself in a well-appointed field tent.

A General, in full dress regalia, helped me to my feet, shaking my hand vigorously. I still gasped, as I tried to make sense of the scene in front of me. Where was the night - my team - the jungle - the man I had just killed?

."Well done Navy that was a fricken Viet Cong Colonel you killed. I've recommended a big fricken medal. Sit and have a drink. Good God Almighty ain't you a pistol. Who would have thought a soft-handed, lily-coddled, mommy lovin', Campus livin' egghead like you could be so damn mean. Gentlemen…" he turned to others in the tent…" the training of our fine young men is the best in the world. And this man, this fine American, is surly an example. I have some good old Kentucky sippin' whiskey. Sorry you missed lunch but we couldn't wait. We saved dessert."

I gulped the whiskey filled glass, handed to me, and asked for another. This was no dream; the burning down my gullet was breathtaking. It revived me just a little, although, I still did not know how I had come to be in the tent.

A Steward walked in and served coffee, and chocolate crème pie, to all at the table.

"So, the device you found was as we had supposed." the gray-haired man, an Admiral, in a civilian dark blue suit and bright red tie, whom I recognized, at the end of the table, asked.

Another man at the opposite end of the table, smoking a cigar, dressed in what could only be described as golf clothes, fiddling with a putter, absently remarked,

"The character of a man is best discerned by the quality of his listening, Mr. Secretary! That device, as the Doctor clearly demonstrated, was trans-dimensional. They clearly used the device to move from their dimension to ours."

"Well, excuse me Sir; it seems to move people from here to there pretty damn well." The Admiral made a grand gesture, with both arms towards me.

To me he asked, "Do you feel any bad effects Son?"

I didn't have time to answer. I felt shitty.

"Well, whatever it is, it's damn important. Thanks to this courageous man we will all be rich." The general bellowed, swilling down a tumbler full of bourbon. "Damned important! I believe my ambition to run for Senator will come to fruition,"

"Let us not jump to der conclusions, mien friends, please," The tiny squeaky voice emanated from a bespectacled little man, with over large ears, sitting next to me, heretofore unnoticed. He was obviously queasy at my quickly diminishing health. He had a slight German accent, more pronounced as he gulped down each wave of upset.

"Aldough dis device seems to redefine our understanding of dee known universe, vee shouldn't - must not - count our chickens before dey hatchen. Please, vould you excuse the apt cliché." He looked down at my forearm, turned green, stood and walked to the sink, obviously trying to gain some composure.

It was then that I too noticed the knife still sticking out of my arm. There was some blood pooling on the glossy surface of the table. I did not hurt, morphine, probably! There was also blood splattered across my vest. My other hand searched for another wound.

The Admiral leaned over and whispered to me. "All Germans are men of war, but for some it can only be an intellectual exercise."

"You are right Doc. We'll do the research." The General reacted to the Brown Suited Mouse. And then we will get rich!" He walked over to the sick filled sink, and put his arm around the, still distressed, little man's shoulder.

"Your cut be in ink, me representin' yer interests an all, Navy. These bastards will nea screw ya. I'll be seein' ta that. Be seein' ya all after the war be over."

I turned my eyes toward the voice, and there in the shadowed corner …by my mother's loving Irish heart, was a Leprechaun. The General, leaving the little, still shaking, green carded, Aryan scientist, poured and delivered the little green clad man a whiskey and walked back boasting their good fortune to the main table.

I passed out.

***

Number two pulled me from the corpse, dragging me and barking at the others to move into the green glow of the cave opening. Thunder and lightning boomed and crashed all around us, and raindrops as big as marbles pummeled us as we moved. We reached the cave opening, under heavy fire, and I was tossed into a corner like a sack of spuds. A louder boom vibrated the cave; wind and dirt hit my face in a stinging slap. Hot wetness ran down my face. I was lying prone, in a large cavern, aware enough of my surrounding to take mental note, but the idea of moving, and speaking, was a distant and an unimportant concern.

"Done, Number Three… check our handy work. We need forty-eight hours to access the situation. Make sure we are buried deep and hard. If you need to, set and time load the C-4, report back and we will blast some more. We cannot to be disturbed. Number Four, I'll take care of our mean fuckin', Navy, scientist-from-hell, here." He gave me a quick grin. "Give me a body count and scout deeper in the cave. You will, no doubt, find brainy types that are less likely to give up their lives for the ideal of world communism. The unrepentant comrades are to be shot. If you think the others are godless and without redeeming qualities - shoot them, your call. I don't think we can handle prisoners – not even scientist types."

"I would just as soon tell you now. God is on our side. Knowing that, if they are down there, I'd rather shoot them all Number Two."

"Very well - make it so!"

He took off on the run. Gunshots soon followed. I gathered myself and sat up. The knife was still in my arm.

"I gave you some morphine. It's in the bone. All I can do is wrap it tight and have it be damn annoying to you. You handled that Colonel with some expertise. Where did you learn that inside fighting stuff? I didn't know you had been trained in that technique."

He started to wrap my arm. He sprinkled some kind of powder on the wound, winding the bandages very tight. The only feeling I felt was heat running up my arm. I didn't answer. I knew what was going to happen next. It was as if I had already done it. I let him finish the field dressing and stood up.

"Take me to the heathen machines." I barked.

"What machines…how did you…?"

"There down there." I pointed down into the Tunnel. "…with the heathen and godless dead Russians and the Chinese Scientists."

Number Four came strolling up.

"Number Two, twelve Chinese and Russians with the Cong; all godless heathens dispatched to whatever hell they worship." Number Four's face never changed expression. "I found some weird stuff. There are lots of sci-fi-weird looking machines and, well, bugs or aliens hung up, in something like big bottles - a lot more than we were briefed on. "

Number two looked at me with an odd look. To number four he said. "When you were briefed, did they promise you a picnic?"

"No Number Two, a f**king rose garden. I looked over some of the paperwork. I speak and read Russian. In my opinion, what they, and we, have found here no one can know. If you get my meaning?" He replied

Number Two looked down at me, and then nodded to Number Four.

"There's more…" Number Four's voice lowered. "…Scenario 23 has occurred. These bastards were co-mingling."

I got up, left the two men, and walked down the hallway-like tunnel. I didn't know what Scenario 23 was, or why both men's faces went white, but it didn't stop me from walking down the rough-cut steps. In the shaft face a metal doorway that looked like a hatch on a ship was open and a green light shone out, making the tunnel appear a sickly place. I went through the portal, stepping over the dead men, walked toward one of the machines. Around the machine, that caught my eye, were other instruments with flashing lights and the large, glass tubes. There were twelve tubes, all about six feet in height, and three feet wide, filled with a yellowish fluid. Crumpled on the deck, in front of the machine consul, copper colored blood oozing from a head wound, was a dead creature - a man/ lizard. I didn't want a closer look, so I shoved it out of the way with my foot. On that machine was a helmet-like device attached to the back of the largest machine with a bundle of wires. I put it on and immediately a kaleidoscope of colors flashed through my mind. Then I saw it all.

The portal door slammed shut. I had a small thought that I didn't want to be disturbed and the machine did as I had asked or thought. I was surprised at first, but just as I had the thought, I knew the machine's purpose. One of the glass containers lit up in an orange light. In front of the tube, a mist formed, and an eight-foot-tall insect-like creature began to appear.

It spoke through speakers in the helmet, while its faceted eyes pierced my soul.

"It has come to you to know all things of things. I, the Lord of God of all Lords, will deliver unto you who have been prepared, the whole of the world." It said in a jarring voice that sounded like fingernails on a blackboard.

A rumbling started. I knew immediately what was happening - I was doing it somehow.

A red beam slammed into the wall next to me, sending dust and debris in every direction. Another hit the floor in front of me. I turned to see, at what looked like, a squad of some green tweaked versions of The Monster from the Black Lagoon, clearly friends of the dead thing on the floor of the lab area. I wanted them gone and they were. They were firing on me - then - not there - not firing on me. I knew what Scenario 23 was…a demon or lizard men, made form blending human and alien DNA. Damn the world, the universe, was weird. I trusted that Scenario 23 had a dispatch proviso.

I appeared in front of a surprised Number Two, just as a Viet Cong bullet pierced his chest, splashing me in blood. I walked out into the daylight through the blast hole, in the cave opening the Cong had created, regaining their stronghold - for a moment. I killed about twenty with just a thought. I walked out of the cave and looked on a beautiful morning. I put unbearable nightmare visions in the minds of the 800, or so, that still did their best to kill me. I had their bullets veer away from me. My, would be, enemies ran away screaming, including Number Three. I tried to touch and mend his mind, but he was completely insane. I had no choice, sadly, but to end his suffering.

The earth shook and threw me to the ground. The helmet turned into a slightly wet mist and vanished into the warm breeze. The machine that had made me invincible had to be moved somewhere un-findable for a couple thousand years. In good hands it could be wonderful. I didn't know any good-handed or good-hearted people. I buried it deep in a coal deposit in the Amazon.

The ship was next. It rose from its earth-covered tomb, shaking off thirty-thousand years of dirt and stone, and raising into the air with a horrible din.

I knew the things inside as evil and destructive. I decided that I could not let the ship leave. If it returned to its home the ‘things’, if their civilization still existed, would know about me and come looking for their new protégé. I sent myself into the ship for one last chore.

I stood again inside the green aura-ed room and sat down the pack of C-4 Number Three had let fall. I culled out one machine of interest and left the ship, just as it went up in a mushroom cloud.

I sent myself to a café in Saigon. I looked at my despicable bloody filthy self and changed myself into a clean white linen suited, straw–brimmed, businessman-drinker of

gin and tonics. I decided that the knife was better secured in a sheath at my belt, than in my arm. I healed my wound. No matter how many stress-releasing sighs emanated from me, my head was in a spin, and I was fully in the purpose of making it more of a maelstrom. Sinking into oblivion was the best of horrible options. Nothing made sense and I was sure it was a bad dream. I awoke in the arms of an enthusiastic beautiful green-eyed oriental beauty, so far, the surest thing in a seriously deranged world

***

I spent three weeks trying to sort out what had happened and testing my new abilities.

Then…

I jumped ahead thirty years to see if I was still around. I was. As it turns out you can live-in two-time periods at once. When you think about it, your body replaces every cell in your body every seven years; you quite literally are not the same person. Cause and effect are related to the action of each of the bodies in that timeline. I, and my other self, could father children, start a war, or just be a nuisance to the bureaucratic mechanisms; it's the going back before your birth that you can't do - something to do with the Designers intention. I held it that it was like the feelers that reach for lightning bolts. Your timeline is your timeline. It's why the insect-things kept themselves just barely alive in their tubes. Waiting for, well, me! It's why I killed them. Their timelines were done and over.

So, I went back a few years from my life in 1984, after the closed-door hearings years after Vietnam, to the place where I turned down the Pentagon in their wish for me to continue to run the Dimensional Shift Project. That was the machine I saved. I lied. I told them the world in that dimension was long gone along with the bugs. They didn't care or believe me. The project had turned into politics and nothing in politics ever resembled reality. The one machine I gave them, a real cash-cow, kept them buzzing and popping out programs for thirty years. In all that time nothing new was found, without me. They wanted to find me and bring me back in the worst way.

I disappeared again

I was pretty hard to catch. But they kept trying.

I would live well enough for a few years, till the Feds got wind of me, and then I'd have to jump in time and place. They had some right to me, I guess, technically, I was still in the Navy.

That kind of forced mobility made having a lasting relationship, with a willing and consenting female, difficult, and I'm a guy that needs that stability. Imagine that!

I still tried.

Her name was Cynthia, she was beautiful to look at and I loved her. We bought a lot up in Carmel, a bluff overlooking the ocean. I built a house, she was an artist, and I found an interest in motorcycles. For five years I found some peace. Money was easy. I just popped into locked vaults, of banks, that did business with drug dealers, and would borrow the undocumented cash for my own use. In those days, every bank did a certain amount of off-the-book business, so my conscience didn't bother me in the slightest.

Holding a bank manager's job in northern California in the late 70's was tough. Sometimes, for fun, I would pop into the Pentagon and grab a sack full of cash from the Brass' 'vacation funds. I'm sure that pissed them off, but after all, that was my money. The stuff I did give them would be worth trillions. We had sort of a deal even if they didn't like it. I told Cynthia I had inherited all the money. I should have known a relationship, based on a lie, could never survive.

It was still a happy time for me.

Until the note… it was rolled up like a scroll, smelled of perfume and was taped to the handlebar of the Harley I was rebuilding. I had just got back from a real- time, in my pickup, conventional trip to LA - for parts. It was three in the morning.

The note read:

Sweetie,

I am so sorry. My Agent got me a show in London. You know how much I always wanted to go to London. Peter suggested that he and I go and share expenses. Well, he doesn't have much money and this is a once in a lifetime opportunity sooo…I borrowed some of yours. I know you'll understand.

Love, Cynthia

P. S. I know that I will grow in this process, but only if I am true to myself. I have to be honest. I have been sleeping with Peter and I think I love him just a little bit more than you. I don't think I will be coming back. But I promise to pay all the money back.

I crumpled up the note and went to the closet, in the bedroom, and lifted the floorboards. She took all the money and the metal lined briefcase I had custom made. A hundred fifty-thousand, and my dream of love everlasting, just flew away, with a skinny, freeloading, girly, little weasel like Peter. I had just about convinced myself that Peter was going to suffer a beating, from an impossible assailant, when I heard a knock on the door. Given the remoteness of the house, the hour, and that friends never knocked, I was sure it was the Feds.

I went to the door prepared to give them a thrill and let them have me for a while.

I opened the door expecting the men with vests, and drawn guns, and waving of warrants, and the thrashing about, and the handcuffs, and the reading of rights, and the hauling me roughly to the waiting cars, whose lights were all ablaze and pointing at my front door.

No, not one of those things happened.

Just three odd looking, not smiling, tall, thin, tanned, black suited, sunglass wearing, fedora topped, no lights shining behind, in fact, no cars at all, just these odd men standing on my porch.

"Commander?" The one in front asked.

I had to think on that one. In one of the dimensional timelines I had explored, I had achieved that rank. I only survived, or was born, in three out of a possible eleven. I had been converted to the CIA right after Vietnam. All I could do was nod. I remembered

there was a lot weird on the ‘Commander’ dimensional track. Including a new constitution, written by an Illinois Senator, Old Abe Lincoln, after the Civil War, and the winning of the Vietnam War and establishing Nixon as President-for-life. Long story that, having to do with trade deals with China and the Federation of Soviet and European States. The rest was a mess. I liked this time-line better.

"May we come in?"

"Certainly!" I waved them in. All three stiffly sat on the edge of the chairs they choose. "

“I hope that we can be civilized about whatever this is about. I have not had a good evening so far." I sat and pretended to be cordial.

The first one spoke. “We are sorry for your loss. However, don't you think that being rid of that self-serving, cheating little tramp, is the best thing for you?"

The other two nodded their agreement, as if it were a dance move.

"That may be so…I just hadn't had time to come to that conclusion. I sort of liked having her around. I was still at the blaming Peter for her infidelities." I said.

The second man sitting in a chair by the fireplace leaned back, crossed his legs, showing white sox, lacing his fingers around the one knee, and added his thoughts. "She is, after all, a passive aggressive and taking all your money would imply that she had a value established, in her mind, for whatever services she had provided you. We only have the street-menu value for such activities, which, by the way, has not changed proportionately since Roman times - she is also a thief. If you told yourself the truth, she wasn't that enthusiastic. I don't think Peter had much influence on her at all. She intends to finance him in a musical career. There is an eighty-eight percent probability that she will succeed. Peter is quite talented and special. You of course did not notice. If it matters - he had honest feelings for you and he will experience some separation anxiety. Also, she will try to pay you back, but because of your unique abilities she will be unable to find you. The money will be held in trust should you, at a later date in this timeline, choose to collect."

The third stood up and went into the kitchen, opening cupboard doors, and the fridge. He turned and walked to the front door, left, and just as soon as he had closed the door, opened it again, pushing in a grocery cart, full of bags, into the kitchen and began emptying the bags onto the counter.

"I hope you don't mind; we have traveled a long way…" He grinned stiffly. "… and you haven't eaten since Santa Barbara. I have eggs, bagels, cream cheese, strawberry jam, sliced ham, oranges from your trees, and good strong coffee."

"Sounds good!" I said aloud 'Feed me before they torture me. I may have to kill them.’ I thought.

Coffee was served with a gourmet creamer I knew wouldn't be on grocery shelves for decades- vanilla-nut. I didn't need to ask.

"The one in front of me smacked his lips and purred at the coffee.” I love this stuff." He put his mug down and turned to the kitchen. Both the other men were hard at

work on breakfast. "Commander, how many jumps have you made? I ask that as a rhetorical question. You have affected 11 timelines and jumped 300 times. We are here to tell you that your work has made this Earth a relatively safe place. All-star races that would seek dominance over this planet know of you, fear you, and know you as a deterrent to their plans. Now, having said that, don't feel too good about yourself. We know about you and we are not so concerned. 'We' can always find you."

I got it, at that moment.

"Good, let's eat." I smiled.

We all sat around the table, ate, and smacked our lips, and purred. When we were done, I turned to the view of the ocean.

"Tides roll in and tides roll out. It's the way of the ocean." I turned to look at the plastic smooth skin of the leader of the MIB's. "What I know is that you try to be menacing and I know that you are dangerous creatures. I have heard of you - later on. But you cannot harm me in any way. You are asking for an agreement before the deal is presented. Find me when you are ready to negotiate in good faith. I thank you for a lovely conversation and a fine meal. I know you have informed the Feds of my whereabouts and for now - I'm out of here."

I left and appeared in my shop in Bakersfield two years later. The Leprechaun was waiting for me.

"Well, me boy…did the men in black give you a scare?"

I stared at him in disbelief then slowly remembered his involvement in my life. He was always around giving advice whether I wanted it or not. I would forget our meetings within hours. I even tried to kick his ass, once, but couldn't.

"Irish whiskey in the cupboard - over by the hoist." I smiled.

"Now, there is the hospitality I would expect." He climbed off the stool and went to the cupboard. He poured two large glasses and handed one to me. He lifted his glass to me. "It is said that no mortal can have - what we of the realm have - yet here stands one that moves about the realms of creation with foolish abandoned. 'Tis why, Saints preserve us, I love your reckless soul. The devil be in full chase, Angels make their wagers on the winner, and the Lord but look and laugh. Drink down the spirit of my land and know I will have your back." He sloshed back the whole glass and poured another. "Where to now, my boy?"

I sat down, stared at the glass and swallowed. I was tired and lonely again.

"Can you make me forget that I can do what I do?"

"Yes, and I'm glad you have come to that. Will you have it be done?"

I stared at the little, green-dressed man and chuckled. Sometimes reality is just too weird.

"Yes - makes me forget!"

I forgot everything.

***

I died.

I had taken my bike off the road on a flying lesson, unsuccessfully, down into a wooded canyon up on the Kern River. I was lying there, horribly aware, broken, bleeding from every place on my body. There were things on the outside that should have been on the inside. I was in agony. I looked up annoyed; a bright light was interfering with my tragic, lonely, and wished for, demise. An angel was, suddenly, sitting cross-legged from me, wings spread, staring at me, with a very vexed look. I said, Look, I am dying and if your pretty boy delicate-self had come to take me to paradise…" I suggested, between bloody coughing spells, "… that given who I am, I think you might be making a mistake."

When he spoke it was almost singing, in a lilt more beautiful than I had ever heard, it was almost too much.

"Are you in pain?" The Angel asked

"Well, I think a bit of my lower neck… doesn't hurt." I could not restrain some amount of anger at the stupidity of the question, and my impossible situation.

"I don't think calling me names is relevant to the situation and I don't have a sex. So, thinking of me as a pretty boy, and a homosexual, is stupid. God made us beautiful, in your eyes, and as clever as we need to be. I asked the not-stupid question because I can take the pain away, but you must stay still, for a bit, so that you won't further injure yourself. By the way, you should ask me if I am from the Lord God. I could be from the opposition."

I nodded, did as he suggested, and he kept his word. He got up, shinning bright and well, in the waning light of the sun.

The Angel put his long-fingered hands on my shoulder, "Your machine, a '46 Indian Chief, 74 cubic inches… wasn't it? It doesn't look repairable. I'm good at humans, but not metal. Were you drinking? I understand that drinking – and driving one of those - is dangerous." He pointed at the ruined metal heap.

"No, one of the rare times that I was straight. Figure that huh?"

"I'd know if you were drinking. I couldn't talk to you, you would deny me, and you would stay dead. I did it, you know? I caused you to crash."

"You wrecked me?" I wasn't angry; I wasn't in pain at that point. "How is that right?"

"You an expert on what's right?" That shut me up. "God says do it, I do it. He said spill you and mess you up. That was done so you would listen. Will you?"

"I have not considered myself Christian for some time. When, where I died. I figured I'd end up in the other place."

"True your recent life has not exemplified the Christian ideal, but you gave your life and soul to the Lord when you were six. You have done some good things. God tends to give his errant wanderers a bit of latitude."

"I don't remember much of my life!" I coughed blood.

"I'm going to give you a gift and if you promise to keep your sinning to at least a modest human level, I'll heal you."

I agreed but I believe I was coerced.

“You are to keep this world – this time-line safe.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. He stood and spread its huge brilliant white wings; the sight took my breath away. I had never seen anything so incredible and beautiful. Then there was a pop and he was gone. I felt bad, not a usual feeling for me, I wanted to apologize for the ‘pretty boy’ thing.

I felt bruised and tried to stand. I checked my wounds and breaks. I was whole. I was covered in blood but I was whole.

I started up a path toward the road; my breath was taken for a moment, as if I had dived into an icy stream.

Immediately I noticed that everything was different. There was more plant life than there should be. Everything was oddly organized to the eye, a garden planted by an insane but concerned landscaper. The sunlight dropped down from the forest canopy in church-like streams. I walked upward for a mile or so, with each step the forest became denser and uniquely awe inspiring. I came to a remarkable place, a large rock cantilevered out over a verdant canyon, cut by a wild free running river. All I could do was look and listen to this life-giving wilderness and simply watch the day go by, a witness to the unfolding of creation.

It rained, washing my blood away and rainbow-ed and rained a bit more. I napped and awoke at dusk. I turned to see a leprechaun sitting next to me. An impossible memory of me fighting this very same creature swirled through my mind.

"Where you been, you pussyboy? I haven't seen you for a while."

I had lost the fight.

"How are you Duane?" I knew his name.

"Things pretty much go here the same. Did you bring any?"

I checked my vest. There was a pint bottle of Old Crow in the inside pocket. How it came to be there, I had not a clue.

"Yep, forgot I had it, but you have to stop calling me pussyboy. That was an unfair fight."

"What was unfair? And you are a pussyboy. I never heard so much whining and bitching in my life. 'Unfair! Unfair!' If you don't know how to fight, why start one?"

"You took me up in the air! You beat me silly. I had no footing."

"Still whining, sissy? I didn't hear any rules. You’re the one said, no rules."

"Okay, fair enough, but you beat the shit out of me. I have a bottle but don't down it all in one blast. Let's take our time and enjoy it."

I looked at the label on the bottle and discovered it was not Irish whiskey. It should be Irish whiskey, not Old Crow. I wished it to be Irish whiskey at its best.

"People out there see you riding and are terrified… hide their daughters and such. You long haired freak - you needed a beating."

"Who's a freak?"

"I'm tougher than you. Thanks for changing the bottle. I only drank that other stuff when I was forced to be around that other lot. My, what mischief they have been about since you left them. They miss ya, don't ya know? I have your money…just ask me for it, wherever ya be, and I'll send it right along. I told you I wouldn't let them cheat ya."

Duane, I seemed to remember, had a taste for fine Irish spirits. He said that Ireland is where most of the portals are and it had been a long time since any Irishman believed enough to open one, never mind, the courtesy of having a bottle of fine sipping whiskey. "One born o' water from the Emerald Isle, a-carried with him." he said. Somehow, I knew - I 'fixed' the booze. I seemed to remember that I could do things, strange things now and then, mostly to keep me out of trouble.

"All right, you are tougher than me."

"Damn right. I'm a kick ass s.o.b…" He stopped and looked at me with wet eyes. A tear ran down his cheek. "I can't hold down the memories much longer. They are a burden to me Lad. You will know and then all will be different. You will have to be responsible - not an easy thing for you."

"What in the world are you talking about? Let's make the bottle last. The first sip is for my Saintly, dear departed, Irish mother." I uncapped the bottle and took a swig, pretending to not be affected by what Duane had said. I was truly rattled by his words.

"Right. I was a bit greedy last time. 'Twas a shame on me, ya know, we folk abhor anyone who is at all greedy. Will ya allow me?"

I looked at the bottle, wondering how it had survived the crash, and handed it to him. He sniffed it loudly and sighed, and then he took a small bit and let it roll on his tongue. I expected him to swallow it all down but he didn't. He handed me the bottle.

"Angel, me lad!" I remembered my nickname. I was getting confused but the memories flooded in. "Ya are a gentleman, for certain. Thank ya for remembering."

He shifted; I remembered the disturbing affect when he was content. I was now looking at a much uglier leprechaun. I took a swig. I sat with tears in my eyes, as sad memories started to roll in. "Don't weep me boy. All of it was as it should be. The world 'tis a better place for ya being in it. There be no one can judge ya for what was done. Ya did, at every turn, what was to be done – for good or ill."

"May I ask you something?" He nodded as I handed him the bottle. "Why do you shape shift like that?"

"It's not my doing. 'Tis yours. We have no shape except what the seer gives us."

"What about the Angel?" I sipped and handed back the bottle. "…The Angel that put me back together."

"Oh, now there's a thing. I can take on the look of an Angel, sure, but should you invoke me with the Lords name. Alas, I must become smoke, or take on the shape of a

deeper thought within ya. 'Tis the rule and we must not break it, for our peril. I, for one, will not spend my eternity with that dark one. Now he's tough." He took a deep draught and sighed again." Ya are a blessed man, Angel, and that's for sure. That one, who patched ya up, 'twas a true member of the choir. Now there be an honor sure. Shhhh!"

He pointed across the chasm at a troop of scaled demons, stomping through the rough brush, pointing and cursing us.

"Pay no attention to those. Do you remember them in Nam or at the concert?"

"No…" Just then, a memory, I was walking out of the cave and was watching all the insane men running from me. Off to my left were six green-scaled man-things growling low at me in a threatening way. I had killed some of them in the cave. I sent them back deep into the tunnels below me, giving them no more thought till the Stone's concert.

"Oh yeah…I remember now. I can move around - sort of - in time and space, can't I?"

"Aye, I gave you a few years of peace but I couldn't hold it back forever.'

"Thanks for that!"

More memories flooded in - not all pleasant. I was not a good man, neither was I a bad one. Judging someone with these powers, as I now knew I possessed, would be difficult. The ends can justify the means, if you can move ahead and see the results of all your actions. To act when one should, or not act when one shouldn't, became a game. Morality and ethics are born from the ignorance of the future. If you know the future such traits are meaningless, dwelling on them useless. It was evil that motivated me to act, not good. My adversaries kept me honest."

"About the men in the black suits…have no fear of them. Ya called it right. When they have an offer, they will surely present it. 'Twas yer politeness and willingness to break bread with them … 'Twas well received, indeed. Ya are quite liked in many circles."

"Are they your folk?" I asked.

"Hard to say. Could be a blend…like the scaly ones - part us - part something else. Lad, there is a whole universe of possibilities out there. Ya had a look at it all once. I guess ya'll start remembering more of that, soon enough. Ya are a good man, me boy … don't treat yerself too harshly for some of the ugliness ya will remember. Wars are probably inevitable, but best if not prolonged. Ya have sped up many. Think ya, on how many more would have died if not for yer intervention. "

We spent the night talking mostly nonsense. You don't get deep thoughts from Faerie folk, but you do get prospective. It's why those who run governments value their input.

In the morning he was gone. I walked toward the road wondering on my odd life, and my duty.

Time had become distorted. I had a memory of the evening's ride and going into a roadhouse, one that I liked - up here in the woods and had a couple of beers. They called

me Angel in there, a place for bikers to party and unwind. There was a girl in one of those gauzy hippie dresses sitting at the end of the bar. The dress did not hide her knockout body. Her black hair was in long ringlets down her back and she looked at me with the most startling come-hither green eyes. There was no mistaking the look and the intent behind it. I wondered why no one else had hit on this beauty, this goddess. She came up to me and asked me to hold her tight and dance, slowly. We did, all night. She said, 'I am for you!' I fell in love.

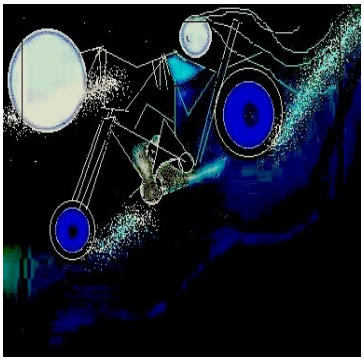
Then I remembered hitting the branch and flying through the air… dying. I couldn't have been in that bar; it never happened. Not yet.

I came out of my reverie a bit saddened. I looked up and there, seated on a rock, was a tiny Fairy. She saw me and rose into the air on violet blurred wings. She flew to my shoulder and her little voice sang to me.

"You will meet your one true love." She flew away as fast as a hummingbird.

Her tiny little face looked familiar to me.

I put my hand in front of me, looking for the cold that designated the opening into the other world. My fingers splashed into something that caused water-like ripples in the air. Would I forget again? I stepped through into the dull and faded 'real' world. It didn't take long to find my bike. The Angel apparently called another Angel who was good with machines. My Indian beauty was better than before its ill-advised flying lesson. I straddled, sat and sighed in contentment. I could keep my sinning to a human level. Hell! I had my ass kicked by a leprechaun. I'll even try a little humility.



The engine started by itself and purred in a way I had never heard before. A sweet piston banging voice in my head said, “Where to?”

I smiled. Nothing surprised me now. "Let's go find that bar."

"I know that place - there is a wonderful woman waiting for you there. She is one like you. She found another craft like yours in Peru - at a dig. She buried the whole ship next to the stuff you buried in the Brazilian coal. Poor girl has been on the run ever since. It's an easy ride up the mountain - will take us about an hour. Unless you just want to be there! I can do that too."

"Let's take it slow, my new friend. I'd like to enjoy the ride. Your engine sounds great. You look beautiful." Flattery never hurts.

"Thank you, how nice of you to notice. Good idea! She knows you are coming. Her Harley told her about you. She will wait. After all, time is not an issue for the two of you."

"I gotta tell you this is cool! Do you have a name?"

"I consider myself female although I have no equipment to prove it."

"Can you sense trouble if it's coming our way?"

"As long as the two of you are near me and Jimmy... that's her bike's name...we'll keep you safe. We two have a lot of 'skills' and the two of you will make a life together. Keep each other right …if you know what I mean? You do have a lot of people and critters interested in the two of you. Good and bad."

"Let's not worry about them right now, trouble will find me. Right now, I need a cold beer and good company."

My brand-new friend purred his agreement and took the mountain like it was as flat as the Arizona desert.

He told me all about my one true love and some creeps due to arrive in 2012.

End

My Mind Is A Carnival

I find myself on this road
fairway to a carnival
barkers yell my name
a sweaty fat man in dirty green
says ‘pick a card’
four percent to twenty-two
the spitting skinny one in blue
hands me devices as I walk past
I don’t know what they do

there are freaks
all twisted versions of me
cursing me
taunting me
blaming me

sawdust swirls
crowds of faceless thoughts
push me
I am led
the big top tent ahead
the Ringmaster stumbles
rummy eyed
unshaven and coughing
in a filthy suit
‘Gentleman’ he bellows
above the din
‘We have three rings tonight’
he points his grime covered finger
‘To amaze and delight’
or jolt in fright’

ring one
ponderous Pachyderms
trumpet at one end
farting and defecating
from the other
responsibilities
never fulfilled
constant burdens
useless endeavors
silk dressed Slaves
pass the hat
binding me
lying `to me
weighted in gray
doubts and hesitation
walking in an endless circle

ring two
the clowns frolic
flit about in garish colors
tripping and stumbling
busy and unproductive
climbing in and out of little cars
demanding attention

life pissing on itself
frantic and useless
insistent and laughing
rude and jealous
where I am petty
they honk their horns
where I am selfish
they throw confetti
where I hurt
they squirt tears
where I love
they dance
mocking me
parody and tragedy
I am entertained

ring three
a naked potbellied man
stands shivering in a cage
with an impotent whip
and a cane chair
lions still and sure
while three red eyed
black leopards
like evil smoke
pace the perimeter
eagerly fanged and clawed
waiting for weakness
watching for doubt

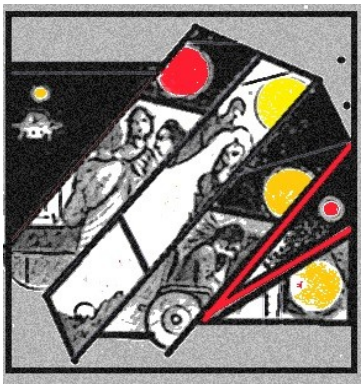
the light fades
a spotlight
finds its mark
a toothless old hag
in a faded floral nightgown
stands on one fuzzy slipper-ed foot
on the swayed back
of an emaciated palomino
singing a stairway to heaven
accompanied by a drug crazed choir
and a balding goateed geezer guitar player
woozily riffing with arthritic fingers
out of key in B

the spotlight moves
upward towards the crown

where my lofty thoughts reside
hard buttocks
in skintight suits
perfect abs
fixed smiles
and jutting breasts
made perfect by daring
swings, flips, and catches
graceful symmetry
working without a net
where I am at my best
this I will remember

The light fades
the din fades
my concerns fade
I await my dreams
Sleep

Scripture would have us believe the Universe was made in seven days. Perhaps it was and if it was why wouldn't it be undone the same way?



Fade Away

Jerry opened his eyes and started, wiping the drip of saliva that had wound its way in and around the strands of his long goatee and wet his orange T-shirt. The alien head on the front of his shirt now seemed to have a birthmark on its large brow. He looked around and saw nothing that caught his attention. It was still light out, so he couldn't have dropped off that long. Maybe, if he was lucky, nothing had faded out while he napped. He felt horrible. It was his responsibility, like it or not, to stay cognizant and perceptive. Sleeping on the job was not good. He rubbed absently the stump that used to be his knee. It hurt, no matter what the damn Doctors said. He rolled his wheelchair over to his bedstead; his pillbox was a bright yellow, so he would never lose it. He popped three white pills, more important than the others, in his mouth and washed them down with a

swig of Brandy. It was a mix not recommended by his Doctors, but one he had adopted in the hospital. He saw no reason to fix what didn't need fixing.

"I've popped the pills and downed the Brandy.

Sweet Jesus, Joseph and Mary,

I'll bare the pain, grit teeth and manly

Front and center Sergeant Jerry"

Jerry bellowed the poem through the open window to tell the world that the crazy-crip-addict had done it again. It was his ritual to remind the ingrates in his neighborhood that even though he was useless, in their eyes, he had one of the most important jobs in the whole world. It was all that gave him any sense of self-worth and he wasn't paid much to do it. A little pension, Social Security and the local Catholic Church took care of his needs, and that was enough. He did it as a 'Calling' and the Vatican knew it had to be done by someone. Jerry had plenty of time on his hands, so he took the job. Truth is he took the job because he couldn't find another. After he answered the ad, from the local Dioceses, and took what seemed a pretty odd test and interview, he discovered he was made for the work and the Church paid in cash, so he didn't have to declare his salary to an ungrateful government. Slipping up like he just did was a no- no. Talent, or not, he knew he could be fired. He went to the phone and called his contact person, Father Joseph Xavier.

"Yes, Hello Father… I'm so sorry to call you on your cell. Forgive me, but I dozed off again… No, I'm watching how much I'm taking. If it gets that bad, I'll call you first. Yes. No more than an hour… You haven't…good! I'll call before I go to bed. Thanks again. God bless you too!" He hung up the phone.

He looked out the window at all the graffiti. Every flat vertical surface, that could be painted, was covered in color and shapes. Jerry had become interested in the idea of markings. He found that humans had been marking vertical surfaces, around their small space in the universe, for an exceedingly long time. Ancient painted and carved stone surfaces have been found in New Mexico, India, Peru, caves in France and Germany, and even horizontal surfaces in England and Peru.

What is it that compels to us to mark our place? Jerry thought he might have some special insight there. Ever since he got home from the Gulf, he understood being invisible to an uncaring world.

"Say…one two threeeee four what errr we a-fightin' for…don't ask me."

He poured himself another drink and let his eyes follow the fine line of purple spray, from the corner of the warehouse, twenty feet to the open loading bay. The entire painting was the name of a local Hip-hop group hidden in color and urban runes. Some of the work was rather good, done by urban Guerrilla artists, as they liked to be called. Names, and sayings, wrought with great composition and wonderful colors. Amongst it all was a great deal of the loud horrid chaos, the black spray can markings of gangs. These signs were meant to be unique and powerfully ugly. They were tribal-territorial markings, insults and dares. Then there were the sad little tags, marks of kids who belonged nowhere else, and to no one. They only wanted to be footnoted, so to speak, that they lived here and they were alive - once- they existed. Jerry remembered when he

was a kid, in a forest in Kentucky, he and his brother had found a fallen down old cabin. Next to it was a great elm tree and carved in its bark were the words 'Billy luvs Beth ifin she wood hav him'. He always wondered if they had gotten together. It may be that the only record of Billy and Beth in the whole of the universe was etched in that bark.

He rolled his wheelchair over to the table and opened up a book of rock paintings. He glanced through them wondering what were the reasons, who were the people that did these ancient versions of graffiti? The answer was in the markings that people made - marks that people had always made. ‘I am here.’

He thought of himself and the last twenty years.

When Jerry joined the Marines, it wasn't because of honor or patriotism, he did it because he found himself in front of a storefront recruitment office. It was as if he had been sleepwalking and woke up there. It was a sign. The deeply superstitious Jerry heeded the call of the universe and joined up. He loved it. He breezed through boot camp and special training and found himself in Iraq, helping to throw the heathen from the sands of Kuwait. A worthy and honorable task, one he took very seriously, by volunteering for every dangerous mission presented. He garnered medal after medal and felt good about himself for the first time in his, otherwise, un-notable life. He had a purpose, to Jerry that was more than important.

Until the 50 cal. Caught his leg.

He was sent home sans the lower part of his left leg. He was honorably discharged and put-on disability.

They found him an apartment and tried their best to rehabilitate him. Jerry tried to tell them all, over and over, that he didn't need rehabilitation he needed purpose. For three years Jerry was as depressed as someone could be, and still be sucking air.

Two things happened that changed it all.

One: A computer Company delivered a computer and all the peripherals to him, because he was a war hero, a veteran, a republican (Moderate), and a cripple. They set it up on the new desk another Company provided for the same reason. Pictures were taken, after a maid service was called in, and some more furniture and decorations were brought over, from yet other Companies that wanted similar advertisement to the humanistic side of their profit taking. Jerry understood - he cleaned up, put on the new clothes, and watched it all happen - singing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in his head. The TV people came when everything in Jerry's apartment was as pretty as they were. They shot the footage for the Evening News' feel-good pieces. Then everyone, with a major portion of their liberal guilt assuaged, left. Leaving Jerry quite alone.

Jerry stared at his new surroundings with awe. He felt lucky. He turned from his spot by the un-screened window and rolled around his newly redone apartment. It really was a beautiful place. They had painted, tiled, carpeted, installed new appliances, new furniture, and even a bed that bent in the middle, very much like the one in the hospital. He was humming God bless America when Father Xavier came by and gave him a thousand dollars, commenting on how nice the apartment looked. No explanation was offered. He blessed Jerry, shared a beer, and told him that there had been a quickening. The See was concerned and wanted added vigilance and reporting.

Jerry went to bed thinking nothing much had changed.

The next day, and every working day, for the following two weeks a computer consultant, hired by the church, came over and taught Jerry the inner workings of a computer. Jerry was a natural.

Two: On that first evening as Jerry tried to absorb in his new fancy digs, by drinking strong coffee, and staring out the window, he noticed something wasn't right. It took him a while to see what was amiss. The Priest's warning perhaps heightened his awareness. It was subtle but such is the way of the Deceiver.

Luis Gonzalas Ruiz Miguel Antonio Ramirez del Rey is a quite intelligent lonely young boy who tagged in a unique way. He marked his name in Latin. Describing his attributes to each name in enamel black cursive. Jerry had tried to convince Luis of his worth and Luis, unfortunately, expressed it illegally. He did, however, express it eloquently. Jerry told him to dare soar above the rest. Jerry liked the kid, but now, somehow, all five eloquent tags, once visible from Jerry's vantage point, were no longer visible. He rolled himself outside, and back into the alley, to examine the place Luiz's tags had graced the garage door. All were expunged. 'Cognito, ergo, deleo,' just the day before was newly painted, defining Luis to a tee. All those tags now gone without apparent trace. They were not painted over or washed away; they simply were not there.

Then he noticed the pothole. It was done yesterday with the appropriate din and ado, only a small job done by the city could muster; three trucks, five workers wearing orange vests, and the nasty brouhaha of a large jack hammer. The hole stared up at him being absolutely untouched, repaired, or otherwise attended to, in spite of the drama and hubbub yesterday. It was clearly not repaired. The crushed Starbucks cup was still in the bottom of the hole as it had been for a week.

Jerry went home and dialed the city clerk’s office and was told that that pothole was to be fixed the following week. Baffled, he dialed up Luis's phone number and got the answering machine of a locksmith. He dialed to the same number and again got the same locksmiths office.

Jerry took the bus to Olive Street, where Luis lived; even his family's house was gone and in its place was a well-established Starbucks. He went in and ordered a latte. Jerry rolled into a corner and sipped his drink thinking it to be the effect of an ill-spent youth, flashbacks, or the disruptive nature of the current drugs he ingested. He couldn't sleep for a week. He reported it to Father Xavier. The good priest brought more money, listened to Jerry's report, blessed him, and left, reminding him, again, of the quickening.

He decided to go to the VA - just to make sure.

He mentioned it to the VA Doctors; they made ‘mmm’ sounds, scribbled in their files, and asked if he wanted to talk to a Shrink. When Jerry said 'no' he was asked if he would like a cup of Starbucks coffee, from the new store across the street. He had a cup. Jerry left in a huff, not missing the sarcasm, and the synchronistic offering of coffee. At that point he knew it wasn't him - the world was changing, rearranging or fading away one small thing at a time.

Time past, as it will, Jerry got better and more proficient with his computer, and even built and maintained a web site. That facts gave light to the problem the world was

facing. His site had members report odd disappearings, or as the Church insisted 'Fadings'. The reports started slowly then, within a month, he was getting a thousand hits a day, doubling in the second month, and tripling in the third month. He gave discs of the data to the good Priest and they, apparently, ended up at the Vatican.

In six months, the whole area, he lived in, had changed so dramatically it wasn't recognizable. Jerry believed he was going crazy. People, buildings, streets all had changed or disappeared. Only the little Catholic Church, down the street, stood untouched. The good Father would come over, pay him, take the reports, bless the meeting, and drink. One evening Jerry asked the Priest if he remembered the other reports he was given, or if he remembered coming over at an earlier time. He said 'no'. Jerry asked if he noticed any change in the area. Again, the Priest said 'no'. The Vatican would give him his task and he did as he was told. Jerry asked the Priest if he knew him before that night. The Priest said 'no'. He was doing as he was ordered. According to the Priest he did not know or had ever met Jerry before.

He handed Jerry a packet.

Jerry opened the large envelope, addressed to him, after the priest had left. In it was a series of documents, seven in all, of fine thick vellum. At the top of each page, in an ornate hand drawn script, were the Spanish words for 'Sacred Text Day One, Day Two, Day Three- consecutively- all the way to seven. On all seven pages, under the colorful script, were written these cryptic words: 'To you has God made witness' and in Latin 'Ita erat quando hic adveni.'

Jerry laid the pages out on the floor and climbed down out of his chair. The first page had filled itself in with typed words, giving an account of what had happened in the last few months. Most he knew from his website; some were new and terrifying. He stared at the other six pages, pondering their meaning, and drinking a jelly glass full of Brandy to each page. He told God, before each belt, that He had made a terrible mistake. He passed out on the floor.

TEXTOS SACRADO EL NUMERO DOS

The following morning Jerry awoke and, to his horror, his other leg was gone at the knee. He grasped the stump and screamed, hoping he was still asleep. He wasn't. When the tears ran out and his lungs tired, he looked around at a 'not his apartment'. In its place was a fancy loft. Leaning on a chair, close to the bed, were two prosthetic legs. Something in his head clicked and he knew that, although it was all wrong, it was as it should be. He strapped on the prosthetics, as always, and stood as if he had done it a thousand times before. Standing, Jerry took one step, and then another. He smiled. He went over to an ornate mirror and looked at a cleaned-up visage. Jerry never saw himself as a GQ kind of guy. The sweater he was wearing was worth one check he had previously gotten from the government.

The loft was grand, looking around he noticed the richness of all the objects and furnishings. Statues and paintings, most he somehow knew he painted, adorned the freestanding walls, each piece lighted to perfection. He had never owned anything of real value in his whole life. Flickers of light danced across the ceiling, making him smile. Two memories wove a tapestry in his mind. One of the memories had him as an

impoverished computer geek and the other had him as the inventor of an interface platform, with unbreakable encryption. This one had lost both legs in Iran in '68, in a war that almost tore the US apart. The shameful near genocide of all Muslims was a dark spot in the history of a free and fair Republic, and a failed UN. He, like so many vets, saw it as just. After all, didn't the newly converted Shah of Iran take it upon himself, in the name of Allah the merciful, to nuke four American cities? Did not failed diplomacy leave great radioactive clots from Iran bombing Paris, Munich, Moscow, Hong Kong, and Baghdad, turning treasured and honored places into nuclear wastelands? The Shah donned the blue turban, during the international shock and paralyses, and created the United Islamic Federation, who's vicious Army invaded our very borders and shores. We struck back - Russia struck back - China struck back, in less than an hour the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, The New Persian Empire, Libya, New Jordan, most of the African Federation, and the Philippines were all a desolate wasteland, dead for a thousand years. For those invaders who survived the invasion of America, there was no mercy. For those Muslims, who were once good Citizens of the US - guilty or not- there was no mercy. The whole world followed suit. If you were Islamic the world sent you to Allah. The slaughter went on for years. Soon there was no mark upon the land where these people once lived.

"No" his soul screamed.

A part of his confused mind told him that he was in Iraq … under Pres. Bush, not at war with Iran. Obama was the President and Iran was just a political pain in the ass.

He also knew that outside the huge windows he would see the ocean. He lived in Upland California miles from the ocean. Walking deftly to the windows, there indeed was a beach and the deep blue of the ocean. He needed a drink. Jerry paused glad that in this place he hadn't given up booze. It made no difference, too many died regardless of the game played. The bar was standing in its entire cherry wooded splendor. It took no time to pour and drink several snifters of a fine Brandy. His memory showed him the disastrous earthquake, and tsunami, that twenty years ago had wiped out tens of millions and changed the face of the West Coast dramatically, re-valuing his property. It only took two weeks for an SUV and an overdressed blonde to approach him, asking for a listing, for him to realize the value of his property, all due to death and destruction. He slept with her - bought her a great meal but did not give her a listing. He had to draw an ethical line.

His last drink he took the time to enjoy letting it roll on his tongue. Lost in the rich taste for a moment he walked to his desk. There on the blotter was a vellum sheet with the words, ‘TEXTOS SACRADOS EL NUMERO DOS’ and underneath 'To you has God made witness -Ita erat quando hic adveni."

The page was full, as was the unreadable nonsense on the first page. Jerry sat down and read more of what transpired in this world, as the first Jerry slowly receded, leaving only memories shared.

The doorbell rang and his friend, Father Xavier, let himself in. He walked to the bar and pulled out a small wooden box. He took out a vial, poured a little of the white powder that was in the vial, onto a mirror. He produced a razor and began chopping up the powder. When he was satisfied, he took a small silver tube and snuffed it up one of his nostrils. The good Father pinched and snuffed his nose smiling at the rush.

"Shouldn't we be concerned that our lifestyle is in concordance with the holy laws of the Church, as we have been made its Agents, by a Seal of the See Itself?" Jerry looked at his friend.

"What is his Eminence talking about…watch for 'Fades'. What does that mean?" The Priest poured a drink.

Like a flash of white light Jerry knew and what he was to do. He booted up his fast computer and began telling it the differences in this world. When he was done, the computer printed out a hard copy of what he said. Jerry noted all the editing his machine had done, signed it, and stretched out his hand to have the Priest take it. Father Xavier gulped his drink, sat the glass down, and came over to take the paper. He read it and shook his head, in obvious disbelief. He folded it neatly and put it in a leather envelope.

"What does all this mean?" The Priest asked.

Jerry just stared at him and thought that he liked this wordily Xavier much more than the one his counterpart endured.

The Priest stood, handed him an envelope with cash he didn't need, and left. The rest of the night Jerry watched quite different Television, actually entertaining, finished the bottle of Brandy, and wondered about all the 'graffiti', so clear in his mind's eye, that was no longer anywhere to be seen. It, like much else, had faded away. He turned to the statue he had purchased from an artist friend, a painting that depicted man alone in the universe. It was no longer there, as was a rug he loved and admired, woven in a like motif.

No thief had taken those items.

He walked over to the windows and looked out on the star filled night and noted that the three stars that made up the belt of Orion did not exist in this universe. 'Three stars gone -stars never born in this place.' Jerry mused pulling a chair over and stared at the darkness; where in another place there were stars, till he fell asleep.

TEXTOS SACRADOS EL NUMERO TRES

He awoke in another strange surrounding. The room was small and appeared to be made of plastic, formed in designs meant for function, not aesthetics. The feeling of being 'another' slipped away like a dream.

"Coffee! You soulless beast."

He threw his cyborgenic legs over the edge of the bed. He was in great pain. He tapped a spot on his hip that released morphine into his system.

"I find it disheartening that you wake each morning insulting me, yet still expect a perfect cup of coffee."

"You are a ship - your heart is an emote-chip that allows you to bond with your crew, and I only insult you in the morning. A small concession you can allow me. Man, I have had weird dreams. Besides, the rest of the day you are my goddess and you know it. I try to have you understand the up and down nature of a real relationship. Where's the Holy Man?"

"You are full of shit, but I do have feelings for you, chip or no. The Priest is at the Com."

"I love you too. Where are we?"

"High synchronous orbit …above New Rome."

"You mean what's left of it. Why doesn't his Eminence move to Mars like everyone else?

"I think He wants you to take him. The last message said for you to read the papers marked 'Day Three' and 'to you has God made witnesses and 'Ita erat quando hic adveni.' Whatever that means."

"You don't have a Latin program – how odd."

"Please, why would I? You barely speak English."

"Now we are acting like we are in a real relationship."

A cup of coffee appeared on his desk. He sipped it and it was perfect.

"You are my reason for living."

"Thank you darling!"

Jerry pulled a leather pouch, from the drawer, and pulled out the seven sheets of vellum paper. On the one marked 'Tres' was written all the things that had happened recently, in much more detail than a news briefing. It was a blank page the day before. The other two were in a language he could not read.

"We checked these papers for invisible ink and stuff, right?"

"Right…and stuff. Plain vellum." Ship's voice mocked.

A pain slammed through Jerry's head. He stood reeling; both hands wrapping his head and fell into his bed. His nose and eyes were both bleeding, running down his face in a scarlet mask. He remembered, fully, two other lives. Too much had faded away and what had replaced it was done so quickly and easily. He went to a basin and wiped the blood from his face and hands. Like a drunken man, he stumbled over to the desk and pulled out the pages marked 'Uno' and 'Dos' They were filled with descriptions of events Jerry had just remembered that somehow, he could now read the script word for word. As if he himself had written them.

He put the pages down, closed his eyes and recited:

"There were once three worlds side by side

As different as night to day

I said a prayer and slept in each

I awoke and two have gone away."

"Jerry, what an interesting poem. I don't have a record of it in my data banks. By the way - I just scanned you and there is no physiological reason for your bleeding. At first I was concerned… Jerry?"

He sat, breathing hard and swallowed all his coffee. He stared at his face reflected in the stainless metal on the back of his bionic hand that rested on the knee of one of his bionic legs. The other leg he moved, just to make sure it still worked. The memory of the crash that took his legs and hand was still clear. They called him a hero. It was bound to happen; you can't fly that many missions, against a seasoned enemy, before your luck runs out. His held on just a bit longer than most, is all.

"What is Graffiti?" He asked in a quiet voice.

"It's an archaic term for the unlawful markings on public or private property. It can be artistic, territorial, or personal. It was done with paint. Most noted in larger cities where there was a large concentration of poor. Similar markings were found in more primordial sites, although it is thought that those markings were religious in nature, those same markings were created by using charcoal or scratching larger rocks with stones. "

"I have seen it on another Earth…desperate and sad. But it wasn't like this place - on that one Earth, it was a soulless place - people had given up on each other. So much guilt."

"Your poem mentioned three worlds," the ship asked.

"The other world had lost its soul. Hatred and bigotry eventually won the day. Read me the excerpts from Genali's book…the one paragraph I asked you to note."

The ship read from its library, "The last war was hell." Earth died in its twisted need. Many say the hatred of man for man was suppressed too long. Our Faith, shop worn and irrelevant for the burden of the times, had failed. There were no winners - just losers living among the ash and ruin. Only 5,000,000 traumatized and weary people had survived. It was a number often brandied about by those righteous who loved the Earth more than humanity. Jerry believed that it was humanity that had overstayed its welcome and was savagely evicted. Some of the unfortunates stayed on earth, in places still clean of war's filth, but most had migrated to Mars, living under glass dooms and in subterranean caves. Four generations and the war had become a memory, or a notation in a history file."

"Just like this one, in an obscure book." Ship commented, and then continued.

"The Vatican was sealed underground, knowing the time would come, responding to half-believed prophecies and a dozen, or so, convincing miracles. The last Pope John had dreams he called 'Fadings' and started construction of the underground, fully self-contained, habitats in the 70's. He had every written document and artifact of religious value moved into the sumptuous new structures deep in the earth. When the bombs rained down, reducing all of Rome, and most of Italia to a wasteland, the Vatican was secure. The Current Pope, strong and supported by a secret Army, raised from amongst the faithful, had dismantled the rule of the Redhats and sent some to Mars to re-establish the Church. Others he sent out into the world, like disenfranchised prophets, to help those wandering in the wilderness. Those who refused his Eminencies orders were executed as agents of the Darkness. The rest forgiven and blessed by the Church."

"There hadn't been a war on this Earth for 2000 years and then one came on us from nowhere and all but wiped us out." Jerry poured more coffee and sipped staring into nothing.

"Are you …you are telling the truth." Ship asked, "You can see these other Earths. Do you know Jerry; I too have had glimpses of other worlds but only worlds where there are IA counterparts. What does it mean?" Ship asked the astonished Jerry.

"Well, my dear friend it means that there are seven universes…I guess. I can't see ahead."

Father Xavier came in and smiled. "Coffee? That does smell good. May I Ship? What did you just say - seven universes?

"Of course, Father." Ship responded. A cup appeared on the table next to his hand.

"It's an intriguing idea." Xavier smirked.

"Pergenius postulated that there were eleven universes and perhaps as many as eighteen. The odd thing is that Jesus was said to have remarked of many mansions being in his Father's house. We shall see!"

Ship forgave the sanctimonious posturing of the Priest. It was, after all, his training. "Your programming is showing."

"My Dear. You are a machine and not able to comprehend the fine subtleties of faith."

"We are uploading the archives now." Ship chirped to annoy the Priest. "Thank God!"

Xavier ignored Ships' comment. "It will take a day or two, even with our computers. His Eminence sends his blessings and regards and will be ready. Jerry? Did you hear me?"

The Priest walked around in front of his friend and stared into his face.

Jerry blinked and looked at his friend. "I want to ask you a question and I don't want some smug Jesuit answer."

"Go ahead." Xavier sat down. Smiling at the insult.

"According to scripture Jesus lead the church for 232 years, conquering the Assyrian Empire, through a popular uprising, and becoming King of what was, at that time, the world. We know that the Roman Empire was a society where women and men were legally and culturally equal. It fell to Assyria in 131PJ, although Roman influences swept the known world and all but eradicated Assyrian culture, but not its rule. Egypt was the second most powerful nation state and Jesus demanded its cedere in 157. Egypt declined and the Nile's annual flood rose 200 feet above normal and drowned every last Egyptian. May their unrepentant souls rest in peace." Both men crossed themselves. "Have I got it straight so far?'

Xavier nodded.

"You told me upon the anointing that I would have other memories come in on me as the time got closer. But, my dear friend, I'm seeing blasphemy. Our Lord was nailed to a crossbeam of wood after he was tortured? The Church struggled under Romans, that were monsters, and some people called Jews, known as the chosen people,

died horrible deaths, being treated as less than human. In my memories Jesus was a Jew yet his followers were called Christian, from the root word Christ, or Krishna, meaning Savior. The Christians themselves, in later centuries, committed terrible atrocities. It's all a mess - wars and horror for over 2000 years. Genocide and starvation was so commonplace it became a form of nighttime entertainment."

"My God." Xavier frowned.

"Our own Jesus was the Messiah and ruled as King. The Pope gets authority in succession from Jesus and is granted long life. No Pope has ever died before their 190th birthday. Nothing more than a miracle- that! Two thousand years of peace, on our Earth, was abruptly shattered for no reason. The world decided to divide into two camps and for what, Xavier? An artifact found in a desert cave, by a camel salesman, predicting the fading of the universe. It probably isn't even authentic. The unfaithful, after having a crisis of faith, leave the Church, causing the destruction of our Earth - our universe. Do you believe that? The world did. We went at each other like mad beasts. Black or white - no gray - believe it, or no, and die for your stand. Or stand too close to someone with a stand and you may die before you get to announce your point of view. Christ, what a thing."

"The Fadings were certainly real and documented." Xavier responded. "The interpretations, scientific tracking, and actions in response to those interpretations caused the war. Jerry it was inevitable that what God created in seven days he would un-create in the same number of days. You are to watch the world you are in, for the 'Fadings'. You alone observe and report it to the See. Did you not tell me that there was a mountain not 300 miles from Rome that disappeared? I knew no mountain. But you did and swear to its existence. What's wrong? Have you seen something to cause you to lose your faith? Do you fear death?"

"Priest, can you find comfort in any of this. I assumed that the existence of earth and the universe also coincided with the existence of heaven, the other princely realms, and Godly Mansions. Should there be a destruction of the universe, then what of these other realms? Does your soul, good Priest, have a place to go? I am privy to two other Jerrys. What does that mean? Do we share souls? In one of those worlds the church states that my sexuality would preclude me from paradise. I guess the best I could hope for is a moderately furnished townhouse, next to a hot spring, with a few pine trees in the front yard – no mansion for me. And will you my Jesuit friend share that eternity with me?

The Priest had no time to answer, as the ship announced the arrival of the Pope.

Both men rose in uncomfortable silence and walked briskly to the landing bay. The head of the Holy Assyrian Church had come aboard, on a one-man skimmer, a nearly invisible craft that could fly at near light speeds. Yet both men were astonished at the lack of normal security and Pomp. The hatch opened and the Pope spilled out in an undignified heap.

"Would one of you gentlemen help me up? I just had my 157th birthday two days ago and I'm beginning to feel middle age."

Xavier helped him to his feet and rearranged his robes.

"Ship please pinpoint citizen pst126745." The Pope whispered.

"Why your Grace that is you. According to my bio-scan, you are still down on the surface." Ship sounded astonished.

"Yes, A clone with a downloaded memory matrix. To some an abomination, but to others such as we four, I include you Ship, a necessity. The Fade has increased, quickened - only a memory matrix, as the one you – Jerry – invented, would remember what was once and now isn't. My double will see and remember what I will not. The replacement Pope will be able to track the changes. He will move the Vatican to Mars. I am now just a Priest and we four have a mission. I want us to set ourselves in an orbit beyond the orbit of Saturn, put the Ship in a matrix field, and we will watch."

"I can certainly do that, but your Holiness what will we see?" Ship asked.

"The proof of the end – God's hand at work. Now - I'm starving. Ship what can you make that will move me to tears and I want a great wine? Jerry, I know you and you are never without the best."

Jerry smiled, "From Pope to freeloader in a heartbeat."

The meal was sumptuous, as was every meal all the way to their orbit point. They were only in orbit three days when they all sat in the observatory chamber, watching Saturn and all its moons fade away into empty space. Thanks to the stasis matrix established around the ship. They drank a two-hundred-year-old bottle of brandy, and then another. They retired, when sleep finally came it brought nightmare after nightmare. Ship discontinued the matrix and each man fell into a deep sleep.

TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO QUATRO

A cool wind blew through the tent flap across her face making her smile. She turned over to see if Xavar was interested in some recreation. But he was off early to the hunt. Cool mornings meant game would spread out a bit and hunting alone was Xavar's favorite thing to do. Jari sat up and felt her leg. It was healing well enough, for such a bad break.

"Stupid mistake - falling over a washboard." She scolded herself.

Jari threw her hair back and tied it out of the way. Later, she would wash it and comb it out and fold it into a bun. But she needed to get to work early today. She stood and reached for her crutch, walking out nude into the cool morning, and sat on the bank of the ice-cold river. She yelped when her unwrapped toe touched the glacial waters. She managed to clean up pretty well, considering the burdensome wrapping on her leg. She covered her eyes and looked up the browning foothills and to the snowcapped mountains beyond. For some reason she was worried, so she checked in with her mate

'Are you doing well?' The loving thought entered Xavar's mind like a waft of fragrance.

'Not bad - a small deer for tonight, and a couple of good-sized conies for a stew.' He let a loving thought fly back.

'Safe?'

'Yes, I have what I can handle. I'm coming.'

She smiled and went back in the tent and dressed. She sat on a big cat skin, one of her favorite things. Xavar had killed it when it was intent on stalking her. She would be dead and cat food, except for her husband's skill. She patted the empty skull of her rug and wished its soul contentment, thanking the gods for her life. She smiled, it was better that she had a rug, than her being a meal.

To the right of the bed pad was a shelf; she reached over and pulled down a thin box. A thought opened it like a notebook. The screen came to life and she passed her fingers, and her mind, across the upper section.

'TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO QUATRO ' - to you has God made witness -'Ita erat quando hic adveni.' appeared on the screen. It made no sense to her at all. Humans passed thoughts between them, as it always had been. Any transfer of a thought concept, beyond any person's ability to transfer to another, was usually converted into a pictographic. She had heard lore that, prior to Mars being destroyed millennia ago, the line, 'To you has God made witness' was in her tribe's holy books and in that strange written form. She pronounced the other words, as she assumed, they were spoken, Textros Sacrados El Numero Quatro' - 'Ita erat quando hic adveni.' Ancient humans had languages like this, but they were long ago lost. Mars was destroyed and Earth had almost been obliterated by the storm of asteroids that came back into the solar system after 20 million years. The humans that survived began, out of need, to use more of their minds. She picked up a favorite stone with an ancient pictograph etched into it. It seemed to her an image of a young boy being brought into the universe in a spiritual way. She, during meditation, would hold the piece and dream the boy's life.

"Light please!"

A glow started as a pinprick in the air and grew throbbing brighter and brighter.

"Fine!" The light stabilized.

Xaver had found the rock at the base of a glacier and thought it might intrigue Jari. It most certainly did. She was able to discern its age and who had done it - Luiz. The boy's name was Luiz. Jari smiled and wished the boy, now ages dead, a blessing. She often told his life's story of wanting to become a Priest at Autumn Gatherings, as a story gift to others.

Xavar whistled, as he entered the camp. Jari turned, excited that he was home, when a swarm of images flooded her mind. Three other strange lives of men rushed into her. She knew them to be her in some way, her on another path. She sorted each memory, each emotion, each choice, observed each moment and scene, understanding what the seven scrolls meant. She wondered at the holy man that sought her out to receive this revelation. Tears rolled out of her eyes and she touched her stomach.

"Well, little one, you will be born in another reality. Xaver! Please come in I have something to tell you. While she waited for him to clean up in the river, she used her mind and filled in the fourth page with what she had noticed. So many things were now wrong. What was natural and should be – wasn't. The geese did not fly this year. Fire was inexplicably cooler and it took more wood each night. Families she knew had simply disappeared off the planet. And no one but her remembered them. She prayed for them all each and every night. Stars she once honored were gone.

Xaver came and sat across from his life mate and smiled. Jari touched his face with tenderness. She carefully explained the seven papers and what the holy man delivered unto her. She told him of the 'Fade'.

"Tonight, my Love, will be the end of everything."

He stared at her and his eyes filled with tears.

"I will miss my days with you and the beauty of this world. Shall we have a good farewell meal and some wine?"

"We'll make love one last time and then we will sleep, and dream of what the gods will create next."

They lived the rest of the day as any other. People came by and Jari would do a reading she knew was false and bless them on their way. Xaver and Jari had a wonderful meal and prayed for forgiveness, for the lies spoken to unsuspecting people. In Jari's mind it made no difference. Xaver touched her arm and told her that the gods understood her compassion. They made love outside the tent under the stars. The night embraced them as they fell asleep.

TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO CINCO

"Damn"

Jerry dove to the ground as a three-foot wide fireball bounced and blew up not twenty feet from him.

Spitting dirt from his mouth he muttered. "Primitives, or not, they are a pain in the ass."

He stood and ran to a ditch, sliding down its inward face, landing on wooden blank that kept their feet out of the water accumulating, more and more, as the day went on. It had rained for three days straight and conditions could hardly be worse. Jerry pulled the canvas flap back from the bunker. In the dim light he could see his old friend. The Priest, Goodman Xavier, was sipping on coffee. He offered his Captain the cup. Jerry took a deep sip and handed it back.

"How in heavens name can you brew good coffee out here?"

"It is nothing more than perception. What difference is there between here and your villa back in New Mexico? Don't answer r- it is rhetorical. You're hurt…how bad?"

"Anything from command?" Jerry took off his helmet and jacket to examine the wound. It's nothing …maybe a stitch or two."

"No - three weeks now. It doesn't make sense unless we've been flanked – or Earth Command is gone. Trans-space chatter is gone – just static."

A Shiver ran up Jerry's spine. He shook it off. "Supernova or something – it's happened before. Anyway, why keep shelling us, sending fireballs and shriekers? If they have captured our rear why not just come and get us?"

"How's your leg?" Xavier poured them both more coffee.

"I don't know."

Xavier handed Jerry a cup and stuck his head out into the muddy trench. “Medics get in here the Captain’s hurt!"

A man came in wearing a filthy, once white, smock and red helmet and tended to Jerry.

A horrible shrill scream, sounding like a demented woman was being tortured, caused the men to fall and cover their ears. The screech lasted for about four minutes then just as suddenly stopped. The men stood and shook their heads. They sat and stared at each other in silence, deafened by the weapon.

Jerry signed to Xavier that the clone leg was working out fine. The real knee still gave him trouble.

Xavier signed back that he was concerned.

They sat with their eyes closed till their ears returned to normal.

"How many men have we left, my dear Goodman?"

Xavier went through a file on a makeshift desk "One-hundred plus or minus."

"I'm not going to send out any more men. We have lost enough – the god’s surely must be placated by now. Between you and me, I’ve have lost my taste for my day job." He reached down in the dust and brushed off something... "Look at this…it hit me in the face when that firebomb went off."

Xavier came over to look at the leather satchel.

"It has your name on it." Xavier puzzled.

"That is weird. Maybe one of our guys got back and died out there - luck really - just luck.

"All I can do, Cap. Try to keep it dry." The medic saluted and left.

Jerry opened the satchel and pulled out the vellum, seven pages in all. He looked at each and turned to Xavier.

"This first part is written in old Spanyarsh- 'To you has God made witness' -'Ita erat quando hic adveni.' That’s ancient temple language isn't it, and only one god mentioned? - Pretty sloppy and dangerous."

"Yes, it is. Temple language hasn't been used for over a thousand years. The Church adopted Englesh as the world language. I remember, from school, that the early Jesusians used an obscure Romina dialect in their services, lest they be eternally condemned for their words."

"I bet your great with crossword puzzles.” Jerry looked back at the papers, ignoring the gesture he got in response to his jibe. “Sacred Texts numbered one through seven. All empty except for the headings." Jerry turned his head. "Do you hear that?"

He handed the papers to Xavier.

"Hear what?" Xavier reviewed the pages.

"I hear voices…damn - sounds like my voice, over and over, Christo, it's almost painful.

"Writing is appearing on these pages." Xavier pushed closer to the sitelight. "Stories all about other Earth's, and apparently you – if I get this right – you wrote this."

A soldier fell through into the bunker. He was bloody and breathing hard. Xavier threw the papers down and went to the man.

"Captain the Verans…" he stopped to gasp air"… the Veran world is gone and we are cut off on all sides.

Jerry ran outside and stared at the dark sky expecting to see the huge blue world of Veran filling the night sky. It wasn't there. Something gripped his stomach and made his head hurt. He had been fighting on the Veran moon for years. He turned hearing the wail of anguish and sorrow from the trenches of the enemy. His mind whirled and spun - then all the memories flooded in on him and knocked him down. All those Jerrys - all those worlds - all those universes, in each he was a witness to the impossible, over and over again. He turned and saw the blue glow in the horizon. Jerry knew its meaning; the diminutive fierce ape-like Veran had set off their final solution. Xavier and the courier came out, looked from the glow on the horizon to the sky. Ten thousand Earther ships were in this system, with the intention of ending a long and ugly war. If their intelligence was correct, the Veran device if detonated would cause their sun to nova.

"How much time?" Xavier asked.

"We have about an hour till it goes critical, but I don't think it matters." He turned to the courier then to Xavier. "Let's go in the bunker and get me those papers. I have to fill out one of them. I think God wants me to."

TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO SEIS

"Mother? Can you speak to the emissaries from Teriane?"

"Yes, I'm tired Xag, so no more after this one. I don't know what I can do. The Universe is disappearing - no more Galaxies just what's left of ours. I've been turned into a soothsayer, a tea-leaf reader, a card turner. And I will lie to them that they are God's chosen and not to fear - then we watch as whole systems fade into smoke, mist - then nothing."

The entourage walked in, saying nothing, all walking forward and handing the Mother of the Great Church a satchel. She took it puzzled by their silence. With deep solemnity the group left, leaving heaviness, making Xag crossed three times in hope of dispelling what he perceived as evil. Jerri of Quinalon, Mother of the Great Church, opened the satchel and examined the vellum - seven in all. She read all the pages - stood and walked over to the ornate wall.

"Show me the stars!" An Iris opened to deep space, darker than it had ever been. What was the Creator doing? "He's tired Xag. We have been a disappointment, yet he made us to do exactly as we did. We fail even when we are as good as the Angels. Our choices reverberate, what was good intentioned, becomes evil. We can't manage what we don't understand. Just about the time we get it, the Creator changes the rules. Look at this Church - it is in fact a planet that we put a polyumetal skin on and took off into the

vastness of space. We use the planets very core as a power plant, to generate the massive amount of energy it takes to travel faster than light. Only the Church can do that. We have made ourselves God's one Holy Church, the greatest monopoly ever created. We are also capable of the destruction of planets and stars – oh I know I blaspheme – relax your face - we saved their unrepentant souls by killing them. We have become corrupt Xag, and we are done. These are from the great cosmic Boss - 'To you has God made witness' and in a dead language from church Primacy 'Ita erat quando hic adveni.'

"Are you all right my Lady? I have not heard you wax so morose." Xag was quaking. "I fear for your soul."

"Trust me. God does not care anymore. It's done. Read these…" Jerri sat down and put her face into her hands.

Xag approached her and took the pages, read, and the glow of revelation came over his tear-washed face. "It's time isn't it? Are we forgiven?"

"Yes …I think we all are. When the contract is pulled, you have to get some consideration. I just don't know where we will go. Is this the end of the world…end of the universe…end of time? I guess in the end, like each of the other Jerris, they felt that it all no longer mattered."

"Do you see them?"

"I have all their lives in my head. And each end - each Jerri did nothing different accept witness." Jerri leaned back and smiled." Xag …remember when we were young and lovers? I remember the Island Grand Falls of Folli Prime. That was the best time of my life. I was a girl in love with being in love, and in lust with you… a lifetime of joy in such a short period of time. Are we too old to cuddle Xag? Too past our time or do we just wait and pray?

"It makes sense my love." Xag let the long-unspoken affection come out in his voice. "We have seen that which was good, and that which was evil, and dealt storm and lightening upon the enemy. This Church is the Ark of God. This great Church, for four centuries, has kept peace and understanding in the faithfully habited galaxies. What better work can a person do?

Jeri smiled and sat down. "Come my love, do you hear it …a hum low and sure… building. The time is coming and creation is losing. Without time, holding it all together, it is no more than random memories. Trillions of sentient beings will cast their dreams into the ether - woven together in a vast tapestry. But time is being taken away - the strands pulled. I would have a kiss. Not the chaste kiss true to our age and grace. I want a passionate kiss that burns my blood and demands what you possess. Let the universe vanish in a quiet puff but let two souls burn out bright within the dark."

They kissed like they once did in their careless and wanton youth. The hum got louder.

TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO SIETE

The dark came so long ago. Jerry woke though there was no reason. There was nothing to do. He ordered the lights on, arose rubbing his space-bald head. He walked

over to the bulkhead and asked the food module for coffee sweet. He took the cup from the alcove and sipped it.

He smiled" At least there is still coffee. Five years of air and supplies…I wonder if I'll go mad before that?"

He sat down on the swivel lounger and asked for files 10 and 12. The hard copy files materialized on his lap, while a tri-vid appeared in the air in front of him. He read all six pages. All the Jerrys pointed out what was important to them. Some of the writings were in depth and historic but most were a mundane chronicle, taking life as a day-to-day ordeal. The primeval need to eat, sleep, propagate, find shelter, and find your place in the universe that was life's waking chore. Some did it with nothing but a spray can, some with good hard work, and some lived in fame and fortune, some lived quietly at peace with their existence. There were words of prayer, and words of the profane, anger, frustration, joy, reverence, and ennui, all in the words of other faded places. Gone now - disappeared by the hand of the Creator who had once made it all, for a purpose unknown.

His shipboard computer had long ago translated every page. TEXTROS SACRADOS EL NUMERO UNO A SIETE and "To you has God made witness' and 'Ita erat quando hic adveni.'

"Well, Xav what do you think? Do we bother with hours or days anymore? There is nothing out there." Jerry stood and walked, with the seven pages in hand, over to a panel. He pushed a button and the wall slid away, revealing pure darkness. "Look - there is nothing out there. It has all faded away. When did the last light source go out?"

"A disembodied voice answered. "It's been a year. Luminescent gases. The last star - two years."

"And yet you and I stay on. The only light in the whole universe is here in this ship." He turned away and sat on the floor. "I miss you Xav."

"I'm here…I'm working on a holographic image - it just takes up ships resources. I want you to stay alive as long as possible."

"Why in heavens name, if there still is one, should that matter? You got sick and uploaded your brain into the computer and died. I am the last human being. That's it - a ship and ole Jer. How old are we now Xav?"

"You are 1478 years old and I am 230 - if you count the upload as my birthday."

"How old, including when you were flesh and blood?"

"1468."

"Have we been together that long?"

"I was twenty-four when we met. And you were an older man who swept me off my feet."

"Did you ever tire of me?"

"No, my love, never."

"I felt as if God had taken an angel and gave her to me as my wife."

“Perhaps he did. You were my white knight and champion. Oh, so many centuries have we been together. Perfect.”

A bottle of Brandy spun into existence at Jerry's side. He reached over and looked down the open throat.

"Good, we will celebrate. We will call it our death day. It’s been a long time coming. They sent us into space and we lived on and on and on. On how many worlds did we rule as King and Queen?

“Twenty-three – my love. Twenty-one after Earth died. All fared well and prospered.”

“We have made so many mistakes. We learned though, and did well, didn’t we?”

“I believe we did. I never wanted to be a King.”

“I know. But Fate would have it – and that is that.”

What I do miss is the caring for others. It was, so often, was sweet and right. I still do that for you, but it is different.”

“It is what we have. We have been granted much more than our share, and only because, by a weird accident, we have lived such long lives. And now we are God’s witnesses. It is our final duty. There were seven universes, not eleven, not eighteen, as the scientists believed. God did it all in seven days, undid it in seven days, and we witnessed its undoing. We will celebrate every - we will be in a constant state of celebration - until such time as that God undoes us." He took another long pull on the bottle.

"I have had a thought - funny really - when you are a spaceship - much of what you do is think? Especially now, when my sensory system has nothing to work on, all I have are my thoughts, my dreams, and you. Funny because that is all you have – me! How different are we now? We are witnesses and, except for us, it’s over. I wonder if anything we say or do would be new – or matter. There is no witness for us. We are now irrelevant. What was the last thing all those other Jerry's wrote? None of it makes any difference?”

“Xav - I don't believe that. I believe we were in a great hall before we were born and an Angel comes and whispers the one deed that God would have you do with your life. You then pick your parents and live a life for the doing of that one deed. The rest of the time is your own. That free time is a gift not to be squandered. The energy of all those sentient beings, on all the once living planets, around all those stars, is what kept the universe humming. Somehow, we creatures of the universe stopped caring, or God ran out of errands…I don't know. I would like my wife back. I miss holding you. I miss the smell of your skin. I miss the sound of your breathing in the night."

"I miss that too, and more."

"We have done what God has asked. Now…" Jerry stood up. “Lord, give us new tasks to do."

The last of things faded and went dark.

"Are you there, Jerry?"

"Yes, my love…but I don't know where there is. I have no body and I would imagine you are no longer a ship."

"So, it seems. I don't know what we are."

"Maybe this is the Great Hall and we are just waiting for an Angel. Xavian Eve, I love you."

"Jerry Adam, I love you.

"Xav, I see a light!"

"Yes, I see it too, and it's getting brighter.

End.

The Mystic

Less without
Deeper within
Dressed in inquiry
Wrapped in possibility

Science a frame
Where all that is
Is left behind
For all that could be

Where vision
Paints a different road
Where faith and belief
Is a demarcation

For the eternal answers
A crossroad
Transcendent decisions
Without context

The left
The internal landscape
Where shadows collide
With memories

The right
The other worlds
God's creations
To walk where angels dwell

Ahead
Uncertainty
And possibilities
Death's doorway

Behind
The weight of regrets
The scars of missteps
The joy of relationships

The fearless explorer
Turns
Through mist
Through the veil

Seeking footsteps
Left by the creator
Seeking whispers
Amongst swirling stars

Then returning to share
The unexplainable
The unfathomable
Facing disbelieve

Disregarding old thought
Tossing out old words
To give new words
To the indescribable

The bad news is there were aliens and they weren't friendly. The good news is that there is a Resistance. And who knows it may yet work out.

COULTER RIDGE

The rope ladder was still in place. Randolph thought it was a good sign given that he had not been this way for over ten years. He turned and looked at the late afternoon sun and then up the cliff. He wondered how visible he would be. The shaggy suit he wore was affective in forest or grassland environs, but he didn't know how well it would hide him against the rocks. He turned and looked into the wooded area behind him trusting his senses as he had always done. It would have to serve now. Scanning the cliff face he noted places that would offer him the ability to blend in amongst the outcroppings. It was not like the enemy to snipe from a distance. They had a weird sense of honor that made face to face kills their modus operandi not that mass killings from above wasn't one of their most used methods. Randolph knew that his death was a priority to them. Such was life, we come in it from the dark and you leave into it. He didn't allow himself the luxury of pondering the ultimate destination or the nature of its administration. The workings of the afterlife were no doubt too complicated for such a simple mind as his. He believed in God and would often pray on the run. In fact, when projectiles and explosions were flying and bursting around him, he prayed in full earnest. Faith had become a natural thing. Even the bastards who now sought him were proof of God. Even they professed a belief in the divine but they were truly godless heathens.

The long shadows from the trees now covered him. If he could get up the cliff face before nightfall, he could find a place to rest for the rest of the night. Slinging his pack and rifle he began to climb. He climbed for over an hour finally reaching an outcropping. He cut the robe and let the ladder fall to the canyon floor. The rest of the way would be rough. They could catch him but not from behind. He looked behind him and noted a small cave opening. Opening his pack and pulled out a pair of binoculars and flipped on the night vision mode. He looked into the cave-it appeared to be empty and of a size adequate to his needs.

A flash of lightening announced the arrival of a summer storm. The landscape flared white in his eyes then a silvery glow outlined everything giving it an eerie feeling. He took off the binoculars and crawled into the cave just ahead of an assault of huge raindrops. A peal of thunder shook the mountain. He sat back and let out a sigh. He would be dry and safe at least for the night. The next flash of lightening was the harbinger for another watery assault from the heavens. This time it was hailstones as big as golf balls that exploded on the rocks like mini-ice bombs.

A week had passed since he had made his escape and he was bone weary. He stripped off the multi-green rag suit and hat. Then he removed his jumpsuit. The next few minutes was used to examine his body for cuts and scrapes he may have acquired in his flight. Adrenaline had a way of hiding the pain but he was pleased that apart from a few nicks and scratches he was okay. He did have one pretty bad cut on his upper right arm that needed to be cleaned. A small torrent of water ran down a natural half-pipe on the side of the cave. He used the water to cleanse his wound then took some anesthetic from his kit and applied it to the cut and dressed it. It was a safe enough place to take the time to wash the grime off the rest of his body. The night was warm but cooling fast. He finished his toilet then decided to risk a heater fire. The cave was high enough up and he was back far enough back in the cave to not be seen by a sniffer unit. If the enemy was using sensobots instead of sniffers his own body would be hot enough to be detected and he would have a fight on his hands. As tired as he was, he needed to be refreshed so that he would be available to the needs of such an altercation Randolph shivered slightly at the night breeze across his skin. It reminded him of home. He remembered a girl and a warm summer night by a small lake. They had skinny dipped and had made love on the bank under a full moon. That wonderful night had a cool breeze just like this one. It was funny though that he could remember the breeze, but not that beautiful girl's name. Coming out of that pleasant reverie Randolph took out a coffee can sized object and opened the top. A six-inch fan swirled out. He touched the start button and a small hot blue flame flared out around the circular fanned element. The heat was instant and soothing. Once comfortable he took out a palm-sized shaver and ran it over his chin and close-cropped head, then over the rest of his body. The device removed the stubble and killed any hitchhikers that he may have picked up along the way. The next half-hour he spent checking his weapons, ammo and sparse food supplies. Tomorrow he would have to find some food or the enemy would not be his most pressing problem.

A loud blast woke him from a disturbing dream. A piece of rock shard crazed his cheek. He rolled over flat on the cave floor then into a fetal ball with his back to the cave entrance. The bombing continued for over an hour. Randolph composed himself and willed his mind away from the danger by singing.

'Tom Manly rode with a gun.
A man of anger a man on the run
He had the will to wage a righteous war
Never wondering what he did it for
The sun would rise
The sun would set
Fighting when it was dry
Killing when it was wet
Taking back what was taken
Teach the young before it's gone…'

The bombing stooped. He stayed still. If they were using motion sensors it would be best to stay still awhile until they lost interest. He calculated how long it would take to sweep the whole cliff face.

Randolph let his mind wonder through his memories. It had only been fifteen years since the enemy had come to America. No one saw it coming. There had been aggression; there was always someone somewhere that hated the ole US. There wasn't

anyone who believed that our country would fall. That old Yankee spirit was always alive and well. We were invincible, created by God and perfected in freedom. Who knew? We had our homes, our jobs, our churches, our political correctness, and our right to consume and burn fossil fuels in our big gas guzzling luxury cars. We had our fast foods and our obesity. We relished our pride and selfishness as if we were entitled to it. It happened so quickly, a nightmare in which no one would awake. In fact, so many died in that first terrible attack that saying we were even a nation was a joke. Of the few that survived many more died out of hopelessness. The rest woke up and started to fight back.

Randolph was a carpenter then. He was married with two beautiful children. He and his lovely wife and family moved from an impossibly expensive California to a more reasonable Kankakee Illinois. Moving into his mother's house he got a job and began remodeling the old homestead. His father had died that year and left him, an only son, and his mother a considerable sum. His mother took a worldwide tour, he never saw her again. After he had finished the house, he was asked to go back to San Diego to work on a hotel. The contract was too lucrative to refuse. He was to go home in September. The invasion came like a thief in the night. In two days, eighty percent of all Americans were dead in the most vicious and prolonged nuclear onslaught in history. Anthony survived because he was working in the lowest depths of a high-rise. It took him a week to dig his way out. Tired, hungry and half-insane he stumbled upon others left behind, cursed to be alive. Life was hard and community took some time. It was a year later that he found out that the town of Kankakee and most of the Chicago area was nothing but a smoldering crater. The bombs were a clean type and the enemy occupied the East Coast to the Mississippi River in the first four years. Their armies moved to the west shortly after. South America and Europe was helpless and fell in the fourth year -the world was theirs.

Enough time had passed he sat up and listened. He reached into his pack and pulled out a black -tooth and attached it to his ear. He switched it on and pointed the retractable wand out to the open air. He had the enemies' evil chatter and equipment being moved away. It was a good thing; they thought they had killed him. It took him a few minutes to dress and don his rag suit. Satisfied that he looked like a bush he picked up his rifle and headed out of the cave. The sun was still behind the mountain and would put him in shadow all the way up the cliff face. He felt comfortable that he could make it to the top without being spotted. He climbed in spurts, stopping every twenty feet and lying motionless, blending into the foliage growing in tuffs all the way up the face. It was a discipline that had saved his life too many times to count. To any observer he would appear to be vegetation.

It took him three hours to reach the ridge. He scanned the flat mesa all the way to the tree line thirty feet in front of him. It looked clear but he waited for a full ten minutes to see if anything would pop up that would cause him consternation. He made up his mind that the going was safe and began to crawl through the low grass. The black tooth was still operating and was good for about five hundred feet without the wand. By mid-day he had made the tree line. Sweating from the exertion he sat under a copse of chaparral that provided shelter. He rested making a meal of biscuits, coffeedone, trail mix and jerky. The food buzz that revved through his body took him back. He hadn't realized he was that depleted. Nibbling a little more often was put in a mental note to himself. It was better for him to eat a little every hour than to eat a large amount at one sitting. He

had to stay fit and prepared to fight. Having his body go into a rest mode could get him killed. Not eating enough would do the same.

It was early in the day yet and his crew wouldn't arrive until tomorrow. He would have to stay hidden until they showed up. The rendezvous was determined a year ago. Randolph wasn't entirely sure they would come but faith was something he had in abundance.

Randolph had done his job. He learned a great deal about the enemy's plans, strength, and abilities during his captivity. The Natural Opposition would need to know what he carried in his brain. His long and dangerous trek from the desert to the mountains was necessary and critically important. The Opposition had taken to digging underground shelters; the largest was the headquarters under the old city of Ramona. A crew was to meet him here so that he could pass on the info; memorization rather than carrying it in some device was the preferred method. Having done that, he was to receive new orders. The idea of socializing with free men and women again was enough to have Randolph jump up and scream with excitement, but he managed to control himself. They may not come and if they don’t, he had to make it one -hundred and eighty miles north to a secondary cache. He prayed that they would come. Knowing that trek was not one he would easily survive. Ramona was south and west from his position. It would be a perilous trip due to the open terrain and wide valleys. Randolph knew that they would travel at night in a zigzag to avoid detection and would probably have cloaking gear or hide shields to cover heat and sound. In any event the going would be slow.

As he was pondering his situation a small herd of deer came within twenty feet of him. Tears came to his eyes. The wild creatures going about what was natural to them brought up an emotion too strong for Randolph to suppress. What was once natural had been taken away or maybe what he was doing was natural. Randolph didn't know but he often thought about early man and how living would have been in those long-ago days. Sadly, in the end, he knew that it wasn't much different than his own existence. Just staying alive was the only game in town, or forest, or desert, or mountain's majesty-one at which he was good. He watched the deer and suddenly felt very lonely. He missed the society of people. Parties, church events, movies, concerts, picnics all so alien to him now. Those activities seemed the work of fiction created by a deranged author about a fictitious utopia. The pain of having it once be real and so horribly taken away was almost too much to bear. It had gotten to the point, to Randolph, that dreaming about such gatherings took on the feel of a nightmare.

His black tooth in his ear hummed a flat tone. It meant that voices were detected nearby, just out of range of human hearing. Randolph turned his head until the tone was the loudest. However, they were coming from the north and not being quiet about it. He pulled out his rifle and set the sites. He waited. The pulse in his black tooth got louder. There was more than one person probably a hunting party no doubt looking for him. He climbed the tree next to him for a better view. Looking through the gun sight and setting it to long range he saw a small group of men and a hover android making their way along the ridge line.

"Damn turnshifts!" he spat out the curse.

Four men followed in single file behind the hunter droid. It would be a difficult shot. He had to get them all with consecutive shots fast enough not to give away his location. The men would be easier but the droid only had one vulnerable spot, right above the ocular cavity. The bullet would scramble its neural net. The men were wearing shield armor and helmets. They too had a similar spot in the middle of their eyes below the brow. Why personal shields didn't protect that spot no one knew. Science was not Randolph's strong suit.

Randolph took five deep breaths and exhaled through his mouth. When he was settled, he aimed and waited till the group walked into the open. A bead of sweat rolled down his nose and dropped to the dusty ground. He fired five quick shots and watched as the men fell in order. The hunter droid let out a loud whistle spun teetered and fell. Randolph waited. The droid twitched then rose into the air righting itself. Randolph let go another round and the droid blew up in a fiery plume.

Minutes passed and Randolph didn't move. He wondered if the thing got off a warning. Even if it did it did not know who the enemy was. Randolph relaxed and started to sing quietly to himself.

"His life as an outlaw was because he was right
Destroying the darkness to bring back the light
They said there was heaven but living was hell
They took all our freedom and our lives as well
Tom Danly rode with a gun
A man of anger a man on the run
He waged a mighty righteous war
Never ever wondering what he did it for."

Patience had kept him alive. The world was a dangerous place and he was but a small cog in a wheel that did not function as it once did. The irony was that he had all but forgotten that world. The inequities, starvation, pollution and disease all were a dark mist. The world he fought for was a world of myth, an ideal, long gone but an ideal worth fighting for. The truth is that man has learned to live under the yoke of many masters with different rules and values. He often wondered what would be wrong with just existing under the yoke of this new master. He would shrug the thought off with revulsion. It was an unnatural relationship, one that even at the deepest level could not be tolerated. Randolph did what he did because he would rather be dead than to live under these new masters.

He rolled over and pulled out a small bible and opened it to psalms. He found solace in the belief that the Lord would come again and remove the shackle of the beast. He read from the worn page. "He maketh me to lie down next…" A noise got his attention. It confused him. Looking at his timepiece he noted that if a floater were sent from the dessert it would arrive within the hour, unless there was a hunter group nearby. The enemy's main base in the region was once called Palm Springs. He spent two years as a tech pretending to be loyal. He looked at the scar where he had cut out the chip that marked him. The enemy preferred the dry desert heat to wetter climes. While working there he learned that the new masters depended on converts. They were a lot thinner spread than was originally thought. Their dependence on technology was their strength as well as their weakness. The entire invasion was done with an initial terrible violent blow

then a smoke and mirror occupation crating organization from the chaos. They made themselves seem unbeatable and using fear and prejudice took over the world.

Randolph climbed down from the tree and decided to find a rock shelter. He was taking a chance that no foot patrols were nearby. He knew that a floater crew would be here soon and he needed the rocks to hide his heat signature. His black tooth went off again. Turning his head, he heard heavy footfalls. There was no way to tell if it was friend or foe so he climbed back up the tree.

The sun began to set as a loud whirring sound filled the air. A huge floater flew over him doing about thirty miles an hour. It was not in search mode it knew where it was going. He thought that those he heard approaching were not friends because they were traveling in the day light. It must have been a hunting group looking for him. But he was wrong. All hell broke loss. Loud explosions and flashes of light filled the darkening southern skies. Then it was deadly silent.

Randolph waited with a sad heart, fearing but knowing the worst. What had made them risk the daylight? Something important was afoot and he didn't know what it was. The sun went down and he climbed down and started to walk toward the south and the site of the explosions. An hour later he was standing on the ash covered ground.

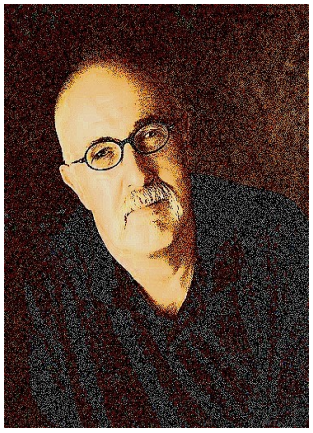
The scorched area was three hundred feet across. Randolph pulled out of his pouch a small device to read radiation levels. He expected it to be clean and wasn't disappointed. This was done using a fuel made of common sea salt and hydrogen that produced a super-heated discharge that incinerated everything it touched. The explosive charges were used to confuse and disorient. As he walked, he came upon a skeleton. All the flesh burned to ash. Another small device read out any surviving DNA and identified the person it once was. He knew the man. This was the crew sent for him. A sinking feeling landed square in Randolph's stomach. It was NOP for the enemy to save one person to extract information. As he looked around, he spotted more skeletons. There were no footprints in the ash. They came in with the intent to kill every member of this expedition. That meant they knew its task and they knew about him. Something he knew was critical and harmful to their plans. He looked again at the blast field and a revelation overcame him. The Floater had blown up. This bunch must have had a portable disrupter weapon with them and had managed to get a shot off before they were incinerated. He knew the Floater would have vided the attack and the enemy would know what damage they had done. A floater was a valuable asset and bringing one down was a coo. Never mind that the pilot went with it. His toe hit something. He reached down and picked up the blackened object. It began to buzz and a voice filled his ears.

"Randolph. If you found this device the crew is dead. They gave their lives so that you could make it to base. We disguised a volunteer to be you so that they would stop looking for you. We surgically implanted a bug in your head. I apologize for not telling you but that device was able to read the enemies biologicals. We have captured their space technology and understanding their biology completes the picture. You are carrying the hope of the world. That just about makes you the most important person alive. Keep your head down and get here safe."

Randolph took it in stride and took the time to ID all the skeletons, including the one with his DNA and said a prayer. He hitched up and started walking toward Ramona. He would live to fight another day.

"Maybe they will have fried chicken." He said to himself then started singing in as full a voice as he possessed.

"Tom Manly rode with a gun
A man of anger a man on the run
The will to wage a righteous war
Never once wondering what he did it for
They came from the stars the devil's heirs
They stripped the planet without a care
Wiped us out almost everyone
No remorse for what was done
It is their way for a thousand years
They claim the stars with death and fear
Not gray but pale blue the bastards came
Killing aliens was now the human game
To rid the heavens of this cursed bane
With God's help now the human game'
END



Closing time! Goodnight from the Jongleur.

The very best to you!

All illustrations by Ken Lehnig©2011 2020

'The Way Things Are' Published by Aphelion Webzine Sept. 2003